

21-Oct-2018 Sermon

“Obedience Learned through Suffering”

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On one hand. The Buddha was right: life *is* suffering. Which I don't like. I'm "in between" jobs right now and *I don't like it.* Who likes suffering? Increase pleasure, decrease suffering. Increase pleasure, decrease suffering—it's the sound of the locomotive for this American life! It's certainly how *I've* lived *my* life for sixty years.

Despite what you may have heard, scientists have confirmed that there are only two types of suffering in the world. One: suffering we're going through right now. Two: suffering that's over. And the point of a lot of activities of life is to move Type One of Suffering to Type Two. From current to past.

And the saying that goes with suffering that is behind us is, "I'm sure glad that's over." Let's all say it together: "I'm sure glad that's over." See how it rolls off the tongue? "I heard you were sick with the flu." "Yeah, I'm sure glad that's over." "Congratulations on graduating from college." "Thanks. Yeah, I'm sure glad that's over." "I see you're back from your road trip with the kids." "Yeah, I'm sure glad that's over."

But it's never over, is it? *Life is really, really hard.* For everyone. And for some people, it's even *more* difficult. Even the perkier among us are likely always just a few steps away from despair, let's not kid ourselves. And the people who, say, look at the news and say "There's nothing to believe in"—they have a very compelling argument.

So we hate suffering. Suffering kills meaning; suffering kills dreams; suffering kills the narrative that life is good, that we can go on singing in the rain, that we can always paint our wagon and come along, that we can go to a place over the rainbow, where troubles melt like lemon drops.

Next year will see the 80th anniversary of two of the greatest films of all time, each in some ways has a good deal of suffering, for the actors as well as for the characters. Both were directed by Victor Fleming. *The Wizard of Oz*, released in August, 1939, is the most watched film of all time and displays the suffering of Dorothy at the hands of Almira Gulch, at the hands of the cyclone, and at the hands of the Wicked Witch. And when the wizard has given all her friends the gifts they need to be whole, she says sadly, "I don't think there's anything in that black bag for me." Only at the end, when she learns from suffering that there *is* no place like home is she reunited with her loving family. Who now thinks she's crazy.

The studios would put Judy Garland to bed with barbiturates and wake her up four hours later with amphetamines. She was acquainted with sorrow. Later in life she is quoted as saying, "If I am such a legend, why am I so lonely?"

Life is suffering, says the Buddha.

In December of 1939 MGM released *Gone with the Wind*, another film with a strong female protagonist, Scarlett O'Hara, who is an early example of a First World Person with First World Problems, namely, she gets everything she wants but nothing she needs. Her best friend is her property. Her internal emotional struggles are played out against the much larger struggle, the "crossroads of our being" (Shelby Foote) as a

nation, our civil war. Vivien Leigh suffered from bipolar disorder and tuberculosis and, on top of all that, was chronically difficult to work with. At one point in the filming Victor Fleming declared, “Miss Leigh, you can stick this script up your royal British....”

I seem to be missing a page in my homily....

The world makes suffer; we make ourselves suffer; and we make others suffer.

Now let’s take a step back and see what just happened in this sermon. I said something funny about Vivian Leigh—thank you for laughing—and then followed up with a very serious thought on the prevalence of suffering. It may have felt like a sharp snap of a juxtaposition. Remember how that felt.

On the other hand. Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). Not only did Jesus *not* run from suffering, like we do, He *learned* from His suffering. He didn’t so much learn not to sin; he didn’t learn about to make better choices; He learned about His calling. And He learned obedience. Psalm 119, verse 67 says, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.”

And what *is* His obedience? It is to suffer for others. To enter into death and suffer it for us.

And God calls us to that same obedience. And God calls us to that same obedience. We suffer that we might learn to enter into the suffering of others. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians, “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the Church” (Col 1:24).

And obedience is not the *preference* of God. Obedience is not the *request* of God. Obedience is the *demand* of God.

But there’s a giant problem with us entering into the suffering of others. Our weakness. And we are weak because we suffer. And we’re with Paul now in II Corinthians, chapter 12. I’m paraphrasing here--“Hey—take away my suffering and then I will be strong and then I can obey you and tend to the suffering of others. But I can’t now because I am weak! Don’t you get it?”

But Jesus says, “Here’s the thing, Paul. And Brian. And Christ Church. My strength is made perfect in your weakness. You share the power of my resurrection. Real power. But ‘only as power in weakness, only as a sharing in my sufferings, as life in and through death’” (James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 495f.).

So, on one side, we have the power of God to enter into the sufferings of others. And to alleviate those sufferings. We have that power. And it is the demand of God that we use that power. But on the other side, we are subject to our own weakness and our own suffering, because life is so very very difficult.

Remember back to a few minutes ago when I told a joke about Vivian Leigh and then followed up with a sober comment about the pervasiveness of suffering. Remember the juxtaposition. Remember the abruptness. *That is our life.* At the same time, weakness and power. We want it to be so different. We want either just weakness or just power. But we have both. At the same time, joy and sorrow. And now, in Christ, the ability to enter into the sufferings of others.

Because “Increase Pleasure, Decrease Suffering” doesn’t really work all that well. For one thing, suffering *is* all around us, creeping in on us, and it takes a huge amount of energy to keep it at a distance. And not a little bit of denial. For another thing, there is this demand of God that we learn obedience through suffering. There is the *Spirit* that He has given us. There is this *new nature* that He has given. And the Spirit and the new nature work in us and *want us* to enter into suffering. Isn’t that crazy? That we would want to enter into suffering. That even—as Paul says—we might now *rejoice* in suffering. Because Paul saw his suffering “as an integral part of the process of salvation” (Dunn, p. 496). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “We must form our estimate of people less from their achievements and failures, and more from their sufferings.”

When we hear of the sufferings of others it often makes an impact on us. When someone tells us of a hardship, our countenance may sink a little. We may say, “I’m so sorry.” When we pass someone on the margins near Safeway, we may think, “That poor person, sitting out in the cold.” We are impacted, emotionally.

In this passage we read of Jesus that He “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death...” (Heb 5:7). For Jesus, learning obedience through what He suffered involved His prayer life becoming His emotional life, and His emotional life becoming His prayer life.

And God wants that for us as well. That our prayer lives may become our emotional lives, and our emotional lives may become our prayer lives.

Now I recognize that many of us may not *realize* that we have an emotional life. It may be that many of those who don’t realize that we have an emotional life are, in fact, men. It’s not that men are emotionally stunted; it’s just that we’ve been busy doing other things. But men—good news! There are tools—yes, *tools*—available to help you live your emotional life. I’ve brought a visual aid for a great tool for emotional intelligence, developed by a guy named Marc Brackett of Yale University. And the acronym is RULER.

As I said, the acronym is RULER: R-U-L-E-R. We only have time today to go through the first two letters, but eventually we’ll cover all five letters.

The first “R” stands for “Recognize.” Recognize that you are feeling something. You snapped at someone. Your chest tightened. Or your shoulders relaxed. Or you sighed. You are feeling something. Your body is sending you a signal.

The “U” stands for “Understanding.” Understand the causes and consequences of emotions. You’ve just recognized that you are feeling something—what might be the cause of it? Did the Seahawks just lose again? Did you just snap out at someone? Are you at risk for saying something you may regret?

And that other person—he or she is probably feeling something, too.

Jesus learned obedience from what He suffered. This is God’s calling to us as well: to enter into the sufferings of others, despite our weakness, despite our drive to increase pleasure and decrease pain, despite our difficulty in traversing our own emotional landscape. But it what God wants, and what His Spirit in us wants, and what our new nature wants. And at the end of our lives, instead of saying “I’m sure glad that’s over,” we may say something about earthly life—with Dorothy--like, “This was a real truly live

place, and I remember that some of it wasn't very nice, but most of it was beautiful..." and Jesus says, "Thank you, my servant, for sharing my suffering."