

THE ROAD MOST TRAVELLED

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Campbell United Methodist Church

Text: Romans 5:1-5

In a recent worship service in a Presbyterian Church in Agua Prieta on the Mexico side of the border, a girl named Anna Flor was invited to speak to the congregation consisting mostly of broken and heartsick people far from home. Many in that congregation have come to escape the drug violence in Honduras or El Salvador. Most have tried to cross the border and been turned back. Some have been deported from the United States to Mexico, leaving family, friends and jobs behind. All have been touched by sorrow.

Looking at the faces of this challenged and wounded group of people, eleven-year-old Anna asked an innocent yet empathetic question: “What do you think about when you are suffering?”¹

In some sense that’s my question this morning as I stand up and look at your faces:

“What do you think about when you are suffering?”

Which, I need not remind you, is something we all do. It’s exactly what Bodie and Jordan told you last Sunday in their excellent sermons - the world *“ain’t all sunshine and rainbows. It’s a mean and nasty place,”* in which *“uphills often loom like mountains and downhills appear like cliffs.”* And we struggle, stumble and frequently hurt in body and soul. All of us do. Because suffering is universal. And it’s also mostly undeserved and almost always unfair.

A few of us are old enough to remember Jack Benny, the comedian, who was once honored with a special award for a lifetime of achievement. Going to the stage, he received a little statue, then after acknowledging the applause, he stepped to the microphone and said modestly: “I don’t deserve this award . . . but then I have arthritis and I don’t deserve that either.”

Now Benny meant that as a joke, but it’s more than a joke. It’s theology! In fact it’s good theology.

*I don’t deserve this award, but then I have arthritis
and I don’t deserve that either.*

¹ This from my good friend Bob Olmstead who with his wife, Carol, recently visited this dangerous and demanding border ministry.

And so the age-old question: If God is good and loving, why is it like this? Why is there so much suffering – undeserved and unearned?

To which I reply: *I don't know*. Even though I keep working on the problem, keep searching, listening and taking notes on this road most travelled, every time I read the morning paper and its chronicles of cruelty, callousness, competition, violence, terror and greed, I am reminded of how little I understand the endemic nature of suffering, evil and sin.

A few weeks ago I drove to Ashland with a friend who spends a lot of time with Buddhists. In the course of the conversation we reflected on the difference between the central symbols of Buddhism and Christianity. The symbol of Buddhism is the lotus, a magnificent and colorful flower, which opens its petals up to fourteen inches across. It represents peace and harmony. A beautiful image.

In contrast, the symbol of Christianity is the cross, a stark reminder that life offers no escape from anguish, suffering, pain and death, not for anyone, not even for Jesus. Yet Christianity also insists that beyond the suffering loom resurrection, health, wholeness, salvation – and that *both the suffering and the resurrection are the mercy of God*. As the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich put it: “*Our wounds are our glory.*”

Now I think that this counter-intuitive insight is at the heart of our morning lesson in which Saint Paul writes to Christians undergoing persecution: “Believe me, I know what you’re going through. I know from personal experience what it is to suffer from hunger, thirst, persecution, shipwreck, flogging, imprisonment, conflict and controversy of every stripe. I know what that feels like. Nevertheless,” he insists, “it is not only possible to *endure* suffering but it is possible to *rejoice* in suffering because *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope never fails!*”

Do you believe that? Is it commensurate
with your life experience?

What do *you* think about when you are suffering?

For Paul it begins with this: *suffering produces endurance*.

Now it’s important to know that the word Paul uses here, *endurance*, means more than simply *taking it*, whatever “it” happens to be, and waiting for some kind of spiritual blessing.

I used to think that’s the way it works. Growing up, the adults in my life would often encourage me to “take it like a man” because “*taking it like a man*” would somehow make me a better person.

Like old Doc Soderstrom, our dentist, who would look at me, drill in hand, and say, “You don’t want Novocain, do you?” “Why not?” I’d ask. “Because it won’t hurt much. And, anyway, a little pain will do you some good.” “Oh,” I’d say as he stuck his drill in my mouth and began to grind oh so slowly as he talked *oh so slowly*. And I’d wait for the blessing, but it never came.

So, because I grew up skeptical about this endurance thing, it helps me to know that *endurance* in this context means developing a spirit that can overcome the world. It means possessing a spirit, which does not passively endure but rather actively takes on the trials and terrors of life in order to transform them into something good or beautiful or true.

I remember saying to the late, beloved Jan Grodeon, who was undergoing a great sorrow at the time, “*Jan, sorrow fairly colors life doesn’t it?*” To which she replied, “*Yes! And I intend to choose the color.*” That’s endurance

When deafness threatened Beethoven, the great musician (whose bones and hair have been in the local news this week) said, “I will take life by the throat.” And he did, producing astounding music even though deaf. That’s endurance.

It’s Nelson Mandela in that prison for 28 years, not only transforming the attitude of his captors, but shaping a vision for a new South Africa. That’s endurance.

You may not know that Condoleeza Rice, former National Security Adviser, Secretary of State, professor and provost at Stanford, is also a woman of faith. Recently I stumbled across a sermon she preached in which she reflected on the significance of suffering and suggested that struggle and sorrow while unwelcome guests are an “opportunity to find a renewed spirit and a renewed strength to carry on. How else,” she asks, “but through struggle are we to get to know the full measure of the Lord’s capacity for intervention in our lives? If there are no burdens, how can we know that God will be there to share them?”

And then turning to the experience of her enslaved ancestors she recalled that under the most oppressive of conditions, when it seemed as though there was no way out, slaves raised their voices and sang, as we will this morning:

“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus, nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, Glory, Hallelujah!”

That’s endurance.

Max Cleland is on the other end of the political spectrum from Condi Rice. Yet having taken the full force of a grenade that left him a triple amputee, Cleland knows about suffering. After rehabbing for 18 months at Walter Reed hospital in the so-called “snake pit,” Cleland returned home, eventually entered politics and was elected to the state senate of his native Georgia. In 1977 Jimmy Carter appointed him director of the

Veteran's Administration. Since then he continued a remarkable life of public service, including a term in the US Senate before being ravaged and defeated by a toxic coalition of post 9-11, pro-war politics.

A United Methodist layman, Cleland tells his fascinating and painful story in a recent memoir titled Heart of a Patriot: How I Found the Courage to Survive Vietnam, Walter Reed, and Karl Rove, in which he recounts how a combination of astute therapists, wounded vets, new medications and faith in God not only enabled him to endure those difficult years but gave his life renewed purpose and meaning. And so this:

When we walk to the edge of all the light we have and take that step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe that one of two things will happen There will be something solid to stand on, or we will be taught to fly.

That's *endurance*: God giving us faith, strength and courage in our weakness to confront the terrors of our days and nights so that our suffering is not for nothing but is, if you will, a 'severe mercy,' part of a painful, grace-laced journey toward a new life.

And so the apostle's claim: *suffering produces endurance* and then secondly *endurance produces character*.

Now *character* like *endurance* has a unique meaning here. It's a Greek word and in Greek it is a verb, not a noun, and it means to engrave, that is to take a hammer and a chisel and chip away the rock. To produce *character* means to sculpt a shapeless stone into something beautiful. To have *character* means to have reached that place in life where experiences good, bad and ugly have engraved a strange beauty upon one's life and soul.

Of course, *endurance* does not automatically produce *character*. We have all seen people come back from terrible situations, not as better persons, but as bitter persons. We have seen written on the face of people who have suffered the loss of a job, a spouse, a child, a limb or a life investment, not beauty but terrible bitterness, cynicism and despair.

Just getting through "it" does not automatically produce character. But it can, which is the point of David Brooks' excellent new book, The Road to Character, in which the acclaimed writer and commentator chronicles the lives of some of the world's greatest thinkers and most inspiring leaders who were humbled and yet made whole by the struggle. Each weakness, failure and sin, when accepted and addressed gave meaning and moral integrity to their life and made them better persons – people of character. Like my friend David Box!

Listening to President Obama's surprising eulogy for the Reverend Clementia Pinckney a few weeks ago, I was reminded of a fascinating study on black preaching in America. Written by Henry Mitchell, the book points out that black religion in the era of slavery did far more praising than the religion of the white master. While "white religion" in

those days was a stern religion of law, sin and judgment, black religion was jubilant, joyful and optimistic. Mitchell draws an interesting conclusion from that. He says:

I am convinced that African slaves didn't go crazy despite the vast majority of cruel suffering in their lives, because they focused consciousness on their few blessings.

In other words they used their religion and their energy to develop their character rather than to curse their suffering, to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. Turning to passages written from prison by another captive, they took this instruction to heart:

Finally brethren, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:8

According to Mitchell, the secret of surviving slavery was the ability to hold to the highest they knew while enduring the worst that could happen to them. And as they endured their suffering faithfully, that suffering carved a strange kind of beauty in their lives.

"Nobody knows, the trouble I've seen . . . glory hallelujah!"

And so the Apostle writes, *suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. And character produces hope.*

Which is to say that people who have tested their faith in adversity don't panic every time something goes wrong because they have learned they can rely on God's promises. They don't despair simply because some new crisis always seems to be lurking in the wings. Rather they wait patiently for the promise of God to be fulfilled in their lives, mindful of the fact that justice has never been speedily attained, and that freedom or healing often require that we spend a period in some kind of wilderness or exile, and that purity of heart may require being burnished by the refiner's fire.

It's what I wrote to David [Box] years ago when he found himself in difficult circumstance: *Our Lord never said: You will not be troubled, you will not be tried and tested and afflicted. What he said is: You will not be overcome.*

That's hope.

Joyce Hollyday, member of the legendary *Sojourners Community* in Washington, D.C., wrote a touching piece about Art Brown, her favorite college teacher, mentor and friend. A massive stroke claimed Art's speech and crippled the right side of his body, leaving Hollyday to grieve for his loss as well as her own, for they would never again share the late-night political, theological and personal conversations that had been a part of their past and a hope for their future.

The anguish was profound as Art started over again like a child, practicing simple arithmetic in his diary and wrestling with emotions that often seemed out of control.

Writes Hollyday,

On my first visit after the stroke I held his hand and offered a prayer for him before leaving. After my “Amen,” he began the Lord’s Prayer; it was the only thing his battered brain remembered from beginning to end. When he had finished he wept and said, “All I have left is faith. I cry to God that I can live a righteous life.”

On my second visit a year later, Art invited me to read his now copious journals. I poured over them late into the night. Two years after his stroke he had written, “What a treasure trove I have stored up in my smashed brain.” He was right. Where intellect had died, wit, warmth and poetry burst forth.

About suffering, he wrote: “A snowflake is a tiny thing compared to the sky. Pain is nothing when measured to the tune of everything else in the universe.”

About laughter, he wrote: “If you cannot laugh, be one . . .”

Hollyday concludes:

Art is learning child-like faith and inviting me to follow. As he put it in his journal, *“I want to spend the rest of my life playing ‘Follow the Leader’ with Christ.”*

That’s what hope looks like. It’s not being “fixed” so much as it is being “fulfilled.”

*“I want to spend the rest of my life playing
‘Follow the Leader’ with Christ.”*

Mindful that

*Suffering produces endurance,
Endurance produces character,
Character produces hope,
And Hope never lets us down.*

*A word of God for the people of God on this
the road most travelled.*

Amen