

BEING MADE WHOLE AND FULLY HUMAN THROUGH SUFFERING

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

October 20, 2024

The scriptures tell us that God's eternal plan has always been that all of creation, including us as human beings, continue to grow throughout life, and transform into the whole, complete, and alive beings God has designed for us to be. Deacon Rich a while back in a sermon referred to Richard Rohr who said that this transformation can only occur through an encounter with great love, or great suffering. I believe it requires both. Let me tell you some of my story, and then the story from today's scripture.

It was 1996. Desiree and I had been living in Gillette, Wyoming. Our daughter Danielle was twelve years old. Tim was six, and Josh was two. We were a family of five. I was one of the assistant pastors of a large Wesleyan Church. I was responsible for Missions, Christian Education and Counseling. Our nuclear family had a wonderful social support network around us, and a church salary that was sufficient for our needs.

Our circumstances changed drastically in the summer of 1997 when I accepted the position as solo pastor of a small Wesleyan Church in the tiny town of Joliet, Montana with a population of 450. There were wonderful, faithful, people in that church, but it also had its share of dysfunction. The former pastor had resigned under a cloud which left the congregation in trauma. To be honest, there were more challenges in that church than a young, green, Solo Pastor knew how to handle.

We had moved four hours away from our strong social support network, and found ourselves trying to eke out a living on a meager salary. Over time I took two part-time jobs to supplement my salary; one as a mail carrier in the outlying countryside, and the other cleaning floors in the local grocery

store. What savings we had was quickly disappearing. One morning on the early morning mail route I was so tired that I started to fall asleep on a dirt road and slid off the road through a barbed wire fence and into a ditch. On another early morning a herd of deer decided to cross the road right in front of me. Dented and dinged up, Desiree and I struggled to find the money for the necessary car repairs.

Under all the pressure, our marriage was beginning to show cracks in its structure. We tried counseling. As much as we wanted to shield our children from the difficulties of life in that small town, they could not help but sense the pressure we were under.

Now, I know I'm painting a dark picture of those two years. But there were also many GREAT times of ministry there; lives that were transformed, and relationships built. But ultimately, the challenges in that congregation and in our lives were just too much for a brand-new solo pastor to overcome. Unfortunately, my District Superintendent, my superior in The Wesleyan Church, instead of supporting and coming alongside and giving us wisdom, added further to the pressure. And so, after two very long challenging years, the church board decided that it was time for us to move on and find another church.

Our struggles were not ours alone. Jesus understood those struggles. Today's reading from Hebrews says this about Jesus: "Though He was God's Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. After He was perfected, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him." Jesus endured great suffering. You and I suffer as well in this life. Our suffering comes at us in many forms; through physical pain, as the result of inner psychological demons, from trauma in our past, grief and loss, financial hardships, broken relationships, loneliness, betrayal, and many

more causes. Many of you could tell your own story of suffering and struggle.

The scriptures tell us that Jesus learned obedience and was perfected through suffering. Now, the word perfected is not the best English word to use here. It often implies moral perfection, or holiness. And when we think of someone being holy, each of us has a particular list of qualities that we believe comprises holiness. A clearer and more accurate word than perfect would be whole or fulfilled or complete or fully mature. We could say that it was through suffering that Jesus became a whole, fully integrated and vibrant and alive human being.

There is a saying that says when you go through difficulty you either become bitter, or better. This better we are talking about is becoming a more whole and vibrant and alive human being; someone who is more integrated and undivided within themselves; not at odds with themselves; more compassionate, and humble, and loving, and wise. This is God's eternal design for us that comes about through suffering.

In the gospel reading, the disciples James and John asked Jesus if they could have places of honor next to him on his throne in God's kingdom. In reply Jesus asked them a crucial question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized.'" Jesus was talking about a cup that he and his disciples must drink, and a baptism of immersion they must all plunge themselves into.

Now, baptismal immersion is not a simple sprinkling of water over the head. Nor is it a partial dunking. Baptism by immersion is a complete and whole immersion of the entire body under the water. Jesus was preparing James

and John, and all his disciples, that there would be a cup that they must drink to the dregs; and there will be a baptism that they must fully immerse themselves into; a cup and baptism of suffering.

Jesus knew well that it was only through these trials and suffering that all his disciples would be molded and shaped and transformed into the whole and vibrant and alive human beings God desired for them to be; individuals who were prepared to go out in love and power to proclaim and advance the reign of God in every generation.

Let me share one final scripture verse to emphasize this point. In Psalm forty-two the Psalmist was going through great trial when he said this: “My tears have been my food day and night,” It’s an interesting conjunction of these two words; tears, and food. My tears are my food. The Psalmist was feeling hopeless and lost. He was saying that just as intake of food is a normal daily event, his tears of suffering had become part of his normal daily experience. It was a sad and hopeless reality.

But here’s where the hope comes in in this verse. His tears had been his food. Food is vital and necessary for our bodies to survive and grow. In the same way the Psalmist is saying that tears – suffering – is necessary and vital for our survival and growth and transformation into the whole and complete and vibrant and alive human beings God has designed for us to be.

You and I suffer. But our suffering is our food and sustenance. Now, I don’t think any of us are like some masochist who longs for and desires to be punished and to suffer. But we know, that just as food nourishes our bodies, and provides the nutrients needed for physical growth, suffering as well provides the nutrients necessary for our psychological and emotional and spiritual growth; our growth into the full image of Jesus Christ.

Whenever you struggle and experience hardship and difficulty, may God, and your brothers and sisters in Christ be your companions in those dark times. May they hold you up and strengthen you. Know that suffering will work its transformative work in you.