



**Sunday, August 30, 2020**

**FIRST LESSON: Psalm 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45**

**GOSPEL READING: Matthew 16: 21-28**

**Message: Growing Pains: Suffering**

**Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel**

We are continuing with our Growing Pains series and this week we are talking about the growing pains of suffering. And although I am certain that we all know the definition of suffering, I thought it may be helpful to get the standard definition and see how it might apply to our gospel this morning.

So suffering as a noun is defined as the state of undergoing pain, distress, or hardship.

Suffering as a verb is defined as experience or to be subjected to (something bad or unpleasant).

Finally the archaic definition of suffer means to tolerate or to allow someone to do something. So in this case, a sentence including the word suffer in this context would be to say, “my conscious could not suffer me to accept anymore.”

And so looking at what suffering from the biblical definition means; to suffer means to bear, to endure, to abide, to tolerate; to put up with something trying or painful. To suffer usually implies the power to sustain without flinching or breaking.

And so taking the time to do this word study on suffer and then bringing our gospel into the conversation, when Jesus said in verse 21 of our gospel; *From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to*

*Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised; Jesus was in many ways speaking of suffering from the point of view all of the definitions I have shared.*

**As a noun**, Jesus knew that he was definitely going to be in a state of undergoing pain, distress and hardship.

**As a verb**, the impending thought of this occurring, I am certain Jesus knew that it would be unpleasant. Hence if we fast forward to the time where his crucifixion was coming near, he asked God to let the cup pass from him, but then later resolved to accepting that it was not his will but God's will that he would be enduring this pain.

(Matthew 26:39)

From the archaic definition I shared, although theologically I do accept the premise that Jesus was both God and human. So although I believe that Jesus could have avoided this suffering, he willingly allowed the Roman soldiers to crucify him.

All revealing to the world the biblical definition of suffering, that the crucifixion that Jesus was about to endure would be just as tragic if not more so than the tragic killings of Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile and more.

The world on Jesus upcoming flogging will experience a story of violence that was just as tragic as the 7 bullets that pierced through the back of Jacob Blake.

And the response to this massacre unfortunately will be similar to what we see today.

It will be a mixture of those who will cry out from the senselessness of it all.

And there will be some who will justify this act of violence, for to them, Jesus will be a criminal, a hypocrite, a complete degenerate to society.

There will be some that will be outraged by what the Roman soldiers did to Jesus.

While others will proclaim them to be a hero, similar to that of Kyle Rittenhouse, the 17 year old Illinois resident connected to an overnight shooting during the protest in

Kenosha, Wisconsin.

And can dare I invite us all to consider that we can grieve Jacob Blake and for instance Police Investigator Mario Herrera here in Lincoln who is fighting for his life at the same time? That it doesn't have to be an either or?

Can I invite us all to consider that through all of the division that exist in this world, that we are all suffering? In fairness, **all parties** no matter what side they fall on will feel passionate about their positions.

**All parties**, will feel justified by their feelings and actions as a result.

As your spiritual leader, I think it is important to highlight that **all parties** involved then and involved in today's time are I will say again, suffering as a result, even if their feelings are drastically different.

**All parties** involved will want to be vindicated in their suffering.....

Leaving us all to really examine when it is all said and done, what side of history do we want to represent; a path of division or a path of reconciliation?

A question that this sermon will not attempt to answer for you.

However, this is a sermon to highlight that although these texts were written over 2,000 years ago, humanity finds itself in the same predicament.

**For now we have approached the why of what Jesus is about to willingly go into this suffering.**

And you and I can see the why being implied by Peter in our passage in verse 22 of our gospel today.

Peter's response to Jesus impending suffering was to take Jesus aside and begin to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

If I could frame Peter's rebuke as a question, he was essentially asking Jesus, "Why would you willingly allow this to happen to you?"

And Jesus response was just as incensed in verse 23 when he said back to Peter, *Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"

And then Jesus goes on to say very clearly in words that a commentary does not need to explain.

Jesus speaks very plainly where a parable does not need to be decoded and says to his disciples verse 24; *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

**25** *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

And this is when the question surfaces again for me as the interpreter of this text, which side of history do I want to be on?....division or reconciliation.....

Which side of history do you want to be on?

**You see church family, the idea of suffering is not something I would ever want to seek out as Jesus has done.**

Dealing with the health complications I have been wrestling with, to be honest, I never want to experience that type of suffering again.

In fact I am making some changes to ensure that I do not suffer again as I had been.

It was frightening thinking that I was going to die from what I thought was a heart attack in the hospital bed a few days ago.

From a physical perspective, I will strive to do everything I can to be healthier in the future so that my family and I never has to endure that type of suffering again.

Furthermore, as my first sermon in the pulpit after three weeks, this is not the type of sermon that I necessarily wanted to preach.

I would have loved to share with you stories of the beautiful mountains and landscape that I was fortunate to still be able to see in Colorado, even though in the back of my mind I knew that I was not well.

But friends, those stories are for another time and another place.

For what Jesus in this story teaches me and perhaps this will resonate with you....

Is that sometimes whether we want to or not, you and I are called to wrestle in the tangles of suffering.

Sometimes you and I may even have to face suffering; for that will be our only option.

And some of you might be asking to yourselves, why would Kirstie say such a thing?

And a scripture that I will share to undergird my statement comes from Roman 5: 3-5 where it says **3** *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;* **4** *perseverance, character; and character, hope.* **5** *And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

So how this scripture speaks to me as the assumed writer Paul talks about the trials and suffering we go through is in a personal story I would like to share of my colleague Reverend Nathan Stanton who serves as the Director of Congregation Excellence.

And let me just say that Reverend Stanton gave me permission to share his story, but a few days ago he posted on Facebook that after a 10 month journey of visiting numerous doctors and specialists who confirmed the devastating news that my colleague and friend Nathan has ALS.

Nathan expressed how this news hurt like nothing him or his family has ever experienced before.

Nathan expressed how him and his family has faith in a God that will never leave us or forsake us.

Nathan ended his FB post with the words, *Say a prayer for us as we face down a future against a disease that is undefeated.*

He shares that he will fight like hell to have as much time as he can with his wife, boys, friends, and colleagues. And so in reading Nathan's post, the first thing I did was cry.

For Nathan and my paths have crossed a lot and I consider him to be one of the many mentors that have helped me to get to where I am today.

Nathan and I go way back to the days where I served at Saint Mark UMC in Wichita, KS as the associate pastor.

Nathan also at one time served as the associate pastor of the same church.

Nathan was one of the first mentors and leaders that recognized my gifts for new church start and revitalization and I participated in a group that would help me to discern if I was a new church planter.

As a result when I moved to Lincoln, NE and developed the Word ministries at Saint Paul UMC; a ministry that focused on the outreach of people who identified as spiritual but not religious; Nathan and his team gave me my first grant to get this ministry launched at Saint Paul. To this day, that community continues to use some of those principles and concepts that I was fortunate to plant within that community.

So this is why I cried, not because the news is devastating alone which it is....

But it is because this diagnosis is attached to my mentor and my friend.

So the next step that I did after crying is I began to read up on ALS and all of its statistics.

And I began to engage God into silent prayer and contemplation wondering why my friend would have to endure this type of suffering.

A couple of days later I learned that I was selected as Lincoln's top five finalist for the Lincoln Non-Profit Inspire Award.

I learned that I was selected out of roughly 125 women in my category.

I posted this news on FB, in which I received lots of praise and encouragement in which I am grateful for.

One of those praises was a note from Rev. Stanton who typed "Congratulations, Kirstie."

On the surface one might say, why is this a big deal?

Well for me, knowing the suffering that Nathan and his family is enduring is what makes this a big deal.

To know the journey that he has endured and will endure and that at some point, his ability to reach out in this manner may be a challenge, I am, seeing Paul's words about suffering producing *perseverance*;

*4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.*

Well let's just say in seeing Nathan still do his ministry and continue to do so with a spirit of optimism....

In seeing how Nathan took the time out of his own suffering to congratulate his mentee when I pray that I can do the same in my own trials....

Causes me to suggest to Nathan if he is watching and listening to this sermon, that in all of what you said, I agree and affirm everything except for one thing...

You have already defeated ALS in my book.

The fact that you are still fulfilling your call and your mission and taking the time to pour in your forever grateful mentee over here....

The fact that in my life alone (for I know that there are many others you are impacting) , you have taken the time to empower me and support me and invest in me so that I can I can pursue the call of planting seeds of justice, inclusion and love for all; Nathan my friend...you have already defeated ALS.

ALS has not stopped you from loving...

ALS has not stopped you from leading....

ALS has not stopped you from taking the time to build others up when others may not have taken the time to do so.....

Nathan, I stopped by to say that ALS has been defeated!

**And so looking at our gospel for one final time....I think I see why Jesus did not shrink away from the suffering that he would endure.**

For there was too much at stake for him not to do so.

For many in our world, there is still a physical slavery;

For in some sense we are all enslaved....we are all prisoners .....we all need to be set free....

And sometimes the pathway to this resurrection involves a period of struggle....

But before you and I can reach the mountain top, there will be some time that we have to spend in the valley.....

**For suffering producing *perseverance;***

***perseverance, character; and character, hope.***

**And our hope will not put us to shame...**

# Let the Church say Amen.

Peace and Love,

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