

Undeserved Suffering Redeems- June 22, 2014

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Undeserved Suffering Redeems St. Luke 9:18-27 & Romans 8:1-5

Last week we struggled with the painful fact that biblical faith does not promise us exemption from suffering. This is doubly distressing when we feel entitled to exemption from suffering. When looking at these matters, we are likely to be looking at suffering that comes from acts of nature, illness, accident, and death. This is the suffering that seems to have no purpose. It causes pain, and we find it difficult to understand or justify the pain we experience.

Yet as followers of Jesus, we must also come to grips with the suffering that is embedded in our faith itself. We believe, in ways we cannot fully articulate, that Jesus' suffering on the cross is mysteriously connected with our redemption. We believe the forgiveness of our sin is related to his suffering. We have no trouble believing that Jesus' suffering was for us and that it did good. As Saint Paul said, it "*set [us] free from the law of sin and of death*" (Romans 8:2). Some suffering has meaning because it brings with it deep good.

Any woman who has borne a child understands the goodness that emerges from suffering. The pain of labor can be intense and all consuming. But 'When the child is born, the suffering turns to joy. The goodness of new life far exceeds the risks and pain of birth. That pain itself is redeemed by the blessing of the child.

Parents know this process in many other ways. All parents experience occasions when the pain of the parent is part of the redemption of the child. In due time, goodness in the form of a healthy, productive adult redeems the heartaches and sleepless nights of parenthood.

Some kinds of suffering can be redemptive far beyond our families and personal lives. The greatest recent Christian prophet of this truth was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King maintained throughout his ministry that redemption can come through unearned suffering. Throughout the years of the American civil rights struggle, those on the forefront of the call for justice were killed, beaten, fire-hosed, jailed, spied upon, and in many other ways attacked.

But Dr. King understood that there was a moral force in undeserved suffering, that it called forth the compassion and the fundamental sense of right and wrong of the general public. The way of nonviolent suffering called the nation's attention to the plight

of the oppressed. It is easy to forget that this was, and to some degree remains, a long struggle. From the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott on December 1, 1955, to the signing of the civil rights legislation July 2, 1964, was nearly a decade of continuous struggle and suffering. But this suffering awakened the conscience of the nation. Redeeming justice could come only through the wilderness of suffering.

Dr. King's philosophy of the redemptive power of unmerited suffering had its roots in the gospel of Jesus Christ. From its first days, the Christian movement believed that Jesus' brutal execution by Rome was not a meaningless or wasted death. Instead, the early Christians made the bold claim that it was this very suffering that reconciled a sinful world to a righteous and loving God. The seeds of this faith had been sown deep in the soil of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the "suffering servant songs" of Isaiah sprouted the idea that sacrifice and even suffering on the part of one person or people could redeem others.

In light of this core teaching of our faith, we must ask ourselves where we might engage in risky mission and ministry through a path of sacrifice and possible suffering that might bring redemption to others. Most ministries of Jesus involve some measure of sacrifice and even suffering.

Those involved in ministry to youth know that when we love young people, they can break your hearts. When we seek to shape the lives of youth by giving your time and love to them, your efforts may not be appreciated and your love not returned. Yet a key part of most of our faith journeys would be the good influence some adult had on us when we were young. Some teacher, parent, grandparent, pastor, coach, or older friend had sacrificed their time and love to make us whole.

Those involved in ministry to the aged know the same risks. People avoid skilled nursing facilities for all kinds of reasons, but underneath them is the painful reality that if we invest ourselves in the elderly and disabled then we will grieve when they die. The relationship we build and the love we give to the elderly may cost us deeply in sorrow when they pass from our sight.

When we suffer for others in the name of Christ, redemption is possible. There is a famous prayer that was written by an unknown prisoner in Ravensbruck concentration camp and left next to the body of a dead child. The prayer says,

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering-our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our

courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness." (as quoted in Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* [San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992], 224)

Let us pray our suffering will never reach this extreme, but let us never forget that unmerited suffering can be redemptive.

We come together today to worship the God whom we know in Jesus Christ-the one who knew' the way of suffering. Suffering chosen and accepted for our redemption. If we are to follow him, we must sometimes choose the paths of suffering, knowing that our suffering can heal and redeem others. Allelujah. Amen.