



“Struck Down, but Not Destroyed”
Scripture – 2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 18, 2018

A colleague shares that a helicopter airlifted a 19 year-old member of his congregation “to a hospital after a hit-and-run driver skipped a stop sign and plowed into his motorcycle. When a friend of the family learned that Pete’s right leg had to be amputated, she phoned his mother to reassure her that this hardship was part of God’s plan. The mother was aghast...this bit of folk wisdom was totally at odds with her faith. Wasn’t there more reason to fear rather than love a God (who concocts such plans)?”¹

God’s ways are mysterious, but God does not micromanage life on earth. Surely if we believed that God exerted total control over everything that happens – wars, starvation, drug overdoses, and cancer – we could never put the words “God” and “love” in the same sentence.

All of us know that suffering is a part of life and no one escapes its grasp. Suffering is inevitable in an open and evolving universe where drivers are free to run stop signs and parents can abuse their children and people can cling to racist views, and where we can knowingly or unknowingly pollute our air, water, and food. Regardless of how blessed you are, no one dodges misery. We lose loved ones, we receive unfair treatment, and we do not fulfill all of our dreams. There is no such thing as hardship-free existence. Pain is a part of life.

That is not to say that everyone suffers equally. I have had some blows, but my parents lived into their eighties, my children and grandchildren are alive, and I continue to enjoy good health. Some of you were robbed of a parent at a young age, some have battled a broken body for decades, and some know the utter devastation of the death of their child. Each person’s suffering is unique and that is why it is never a good idea to say to someone who is grieving, “I know how you feel.” You may have experienced a similar loss, but you do not know how another person feels because every relationship is unique and everyone has different unfinished business when their loved one dies.

Suffering is not the result of divine retribution. Despite the Book of Job which clearly states that suffering is *not* the result of God’s vengeance, many cling to the notion that suffering is God’s punishment for sin. How sad to carry around in your mind an image of a divine taskmaster eager to punish, rather than a loving Father who runs down the road to welcome home his wayward son or a faithful Shepherd determined to walk alongside us when we trek through our darkest valley. For those who believe suffering is divine punishment, all they can do is plead to God for mercy so that God will not torture them with a painful loss.

If God does not cause our suffering, what does?

We know that some suffering is the result of making a bad decision. Our actions have consequences. If you choose to smoke you may get cancer, if you embezzle funds you may end up in prison, if you take drugs you may overdose. We bring some suffering upon ourselves.

Of course, some of our suffering is caused by others. On Valentine's Day, Nikolas Cruz walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and opened fire with an assault rifle. He murdered 17 and wounded at least 17 more, and now hundreds suffer the very painful loss of family and friends. The parents whose children were murdered will agonize over their loss the remainder of their lives. Nothing will ever fill the void in their soul. Nothing will ever erase their regrets of what their child might have accomplished if only she had lived.

Last Wednesday, students throughout our country either walked out of their classrooms in protest of the lack of action on gun control, or spent time in their classrooms discussing it. High school students must already cope with the pressure of making grades good enough to get accepted into the right colleges. Now they sit in classrooms pondering what they would do if someone walked into their school and opened fire with an assault rifle. They know it is a real possibility. A senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School said, "Our trauma isn't going away."

When I was in high school, the most traumatic event was when three of my classmates were killed in a car wreck. It hit all of us hard and it compelled all of us to become safer drivers – for a few weeks. I cannot imagine the trauma caused by someone mowing down my classmates with an assault rifle. Students cannot simply return to class and wipe their minds clean of the horror. In addition to profound sadness, students will experience anxiety, fear, nightmares, and depression.

John O'Donohue writes: "Suffering unhouses and dislocates you. Suffering is the arrival of darkness from an angle you never expected. There are different kinds of darkness. There is the night when the darkness is evenly brushed. The sky is studded with the crystal light of stars and the moon casts mint light over the fields. Though you are in the darkness, your ways are guided by a gentle light. This is not the darkness of deep suffering. When real suffering comes, the light goes out completely. There is nothing but a forsaken darkness, frightening in its density... (and) The dark squall of suffering...rips the fragile net of meaning to shreds."²

If you have experienced profound suffering you know the truth of his words. Hope and meaning vanish. Simply getting out of bed and facing the day is an enormous undertaking.

Some become stuck in their grief, unable to move past the unfairness of what has befallen them. They may have had a sense that life was fair and they cannot accept the fact that something so terribly *unfair* has struck them. Life is not supposed to be so cruel.

While some people of faith believe they are supposed to be immune from harsh suffering, the first few generations of Christians had the opposite reaction. They assumed that being a Christian assured hardships. It took courage to walk away from the faith of their community and their ancestors. It was risky to say, "Jesus is Lord" and therefore the Emperor is not.

When we thumb through the Scriptures, we realize that many of the heroes of faith experienced unimaginable suffering. John the Baptist was imprisoned, then beheaded. Stephen was stoned to death just outside the gates of Jerusalem. Jesus was ridiculed by adversaries, betrayed by a close friend, and executed by the state in one of the grisliest means ever devised.

Today as we ponder the words of the Apostle Paul, it is essential that we put them into context by remembering the massive suffering Paul endured. Not only was he imprisoned more than once, he was whipped with 39 lashes five times, he was beaten with rods three times, he was stoned, he was shipwrecked three times, and once was

adrift at sea for a day and a night. He could have become bitter and beaten down, but he wrote to the congregation in Corinth, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Did you see that Stephen Hawking died last week? For 55 of his 76 years, he lived with motor neuron disease. Many people with such a debilitating condition pull back from life and live in self-pity. Hawking learned to make a computer speak for him and advanced the field of theoretical physics. Earlier this year, he spoke at the Royal Institute in London. His topic? Depression. He “drew a poetic parallel between black holes and depression...His message was that black holes are not as black as they are painted. They are not the eternal prisons they once were thought to be. Things can get out of a black hole both on the outside and possibly to another universe.” He said, “So if you feel as if you are in a black hole, don’t give up – there is a way out.”³ His life serves as a testimony to such hope.

I do not believe that Paul never had doubts, never experienced fear, never suffered from depression, never considered giving up. Surely he experienced the range of human emotions that accompanies great suffering. Yet he refused to imagine that the darkness was the final word. He believed it is possible to claw your way out of a black hole. He refused to be defeated.

The student from the Parkland, Florida high school who said, “Our trauma is not going away,” also possesses the kind of attitude that will not be defeated by suffering. Her full statement was, “Our trauma isn’t going away, but neither are we. We will fight every day because we have to, because change is the only thing that makes any of this bearable.”⁴

She is not ignoring the tragedy by saying, “Let’s put on a cheery face.” Neither is she trying to minimize it by saying, “God must have had a purpose for this.” She is determined to redeem the tragedy to whatever extent possible by bringing something good out of horrific evil. This is the formula adopted by many to help them handle their suffering.

In order to bear the pain of losing their children who were killed by a drunk driver, mothers joined forces and created MADD – Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Some who lose a loved one to drug or alcohol abuse throw themselves into addiction awareness programs. To help themselves overcome their pain and loss of meaning, they throw themselves into a project that will spare another parent from similar suffering. To help themselves climb out of the black hole, they dedicate themselves to an undertaking that can bring light out of darkness.

Suffering can be like a virus that spreads. A friend said, “Suffering begets suffering. Hurt people hurt people.” Richard Rohr says, “If we do not transform (our suffering), we will most assuredly transmit it.”⁵

When suffering strikes, when pain threatens to crush us and darkness threatens to overwhelm us, I pray that we will ask God to show us how to climb out of our black hole by bringing something positive out of our calamity. To prepare ourselves for that day, we can adopt the defiant stance of the Apostle Paul: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

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May it be so.

NOTES

1. Peter Marty, "Not God's Marionettes," *The Christian Century*, June 21, 2017, p.3.
2. John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p.156-157.
3. "Stephen Hawking, one of the greatest minds to have ever lived, has died" MSN Lifestyle, March 15, 2018.
4. *Lionor Munoz*, quoted in "We Stand with the Students," in *The New York Times*, March 13, 2018
5. Richard Rohr, *Just This*, (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Center for Action and Contemplation Publishing, 2017), p. 76-77.

Prayers of the People – Barbara Jobe

Let us pray. Gracious God, we are thankful that we can pray, that you promise to hear us, that we are not alone. Draw near to us oh God to hear our spoken prayers and the whispers of our hearts.

We pray today for all who are walking a hard journey:

For those whose daily paths encounter barbed wire, walls, or guns;
And for leaders near and far who work for safety, peace and justice

We pray for those who have been forced to leave their homes;
And for those who work tirelessly to welcome and resettle them

We pray for those who set out today in search of food, medicine or clean water;
And for those who partner with them to build more abundant lives

We pray for those whose journey is marred by pain or despair,
And for those who use their gifts to heal and comfort

We pray for those who seek profit from the earth's resources
And those who remember that the world and all its bounty is yours.

Today, some of us are making a move and beginning again;
Some are clinging on to something that has ended;
Some are suffering, and some are recovering
Some are taking a first breath of life,
Some will soon be taking their last.

We pray for the church that it may meet us wherever we are and guide us as we seek answers about life and death;

Loving God, as we journey through Lent, may shared stories about the hard places of Jesus' experience, and Paul's courageous response to suffering in Christ's name give hope to all whose journey through life is far from easy. And may these stories inspire us to risk Christ's Way of love as we share the journey with other travelers.

We offer these prayers for the world, the earth, and the church in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying,

Our father, who art in heaven...

Inspired by and adapted from
The Journey by Ann Siddall