

Palm Sunday 07

In our worship this morning, we've set two huge events in Jesus' life beside one another. First is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with all the palm waving and joyous singing; then the Passiontide story of Jesus suffering and death. Joy versus mourning, in a word. It's easier for us to want the joy. But to see mourning as having greater value, that we've much more difficulty embracing. Knowing the Passion of Christ is for us, and being able to experience at least some of its emotions, is seeing how God's LOVE for us is manifested in our hero, Jesus, not only in his suffering, minimally in suffering, but more, so much more, in his being completely, utterly and totally rejected by God and humankind. The Psalmist says of Jesus: "Like the dead I am forgotten, out of mind; I am as useless as a broken pot."

It's God who spoke the truth that Jesus must suffer AND be rejected. These two together, suffering and rejection, is God's tandem judgment upon all sinners. Only Jesus could take both as the most severe of all possible punishments for OUR human greed and lovelessness. Only the Son of God could embrace and endure rejection this totally, on our behalf.

Bonhoeffer says that suffering, on the one hand, and rejection on the other, are not the same. In short, suffering has some self-revealing dignity about it, some "self-value" that gives us a little momentary prestige, or attention, at least. Rejection, however, is complete abandonment. Responding to suffering, we Christians are rightly taught to have compassion towards those who are suffering, to reach out to them and comfort them, precisely so they don't feel alone, isolated, forgotten or rejected. Just about everywhere we can look these days, we see suffering around us. And, we make spirit-led attempts to address whatever needs we can, to benefit those who suffer. That's a good and necessary ethic to encourage, and I pray we'll never stop. Could it be, on the other hand, that perhaps we make a little too much of our own sufferings? This isn't to say that our sometimes crushed spirits should be ignored. Giving spiritual aid IS one of the things I'm called to do with you as your pastor. But, highlighting our own suffering could mean that, in our spiritual calling to be followers of Jesus, we might be less able see clearly enough

through our own suffering, to be doing more than we think we're capable of. Even if we suffer, we still have enough energy to be helping others, even though we ourselves feel crippled. I'm not saying that any particular person known to me is whining about their suffering. I don't mean that. I'm not singling anyone out. What I am saying, is that suffering is universal. In fact, it connects all of humanity.

In Art Speigleman's stunning comic book, MAUS, he writes about his father's holocaust experiences in Poland during WW2. There's a one frame comment that summarizes how no one's suffering trumps anyone else'. Speigleman's father is but one of thousands of Jews hiding in unspeakably horrible, grungy, makeshift crawlspaces, trying to survive and keep his family from being shot or gassed by the Nazis. The only daily bread available is what they can manage to scrounge in nighttime forays from gutters and garbage dumps. One day, cooped up with his family in their hiding place after days on end without finding edible food, he chants in hopeless dismay "Ohhhh – I wish I had some bread.... I wish I had some bread...I wish – " One of the others shouts, "QUIET! We're all starving." Suffering was the great equalizer for Jews in Europe during those days. And, yet, as Speigleman goes on to say, so many went out of their way to try to help someone else, suffering even more than they. Suffering is the great equalizer of all humanity. We're all suffering in one way or another.

This is what Bonhoeffer means when he says suffering has its own self-value, its own way of holding disparate people together. But, it's different from Jesus' suffering and rejection.

By itself, suffering, whether ours' or someone else', does have dignity and maybe even purpose. Look at the outpouring of neighborhood outrage when one young Indianapolis girl was so terribly violated last week. She'll no doubt take a long time to heal, because her suffering's been great, but it looks as though compassionate support systems are being put in place to help restore her dignity and prevent something like that from ever happening again, in their neighborhood, at least. We pray it shall be so.

If all that Jesus had to endure was suffering, however, what would make him any different from any number of those others, considered martyrs, by the host of differing Faiths on our planet? God said that Jesus was to be rejected, too. Not just suffer, but be rejected. One by one, his friends left him, gave up hope for him, deserted him. At the foot of the cross He gave his mother away. He was shamed, the ultimate rejecting strategy, by the civil and religious courts, and left hanging, stripped of clothing and bleeding for all passersby to see. And finally, he was rejected by God, as Jesus painfully exclaimed from the cross. No one, not even Jesus' Heavenly Father, was left to love him in his suffering. That is the ultimate hopelessness and lovelessness. Jesus was thoroughly rejected.

In our Christian walk of faith, it's easier to see how we might accept the pains we must suffer, even if following Jesus means some suffering in our lives; but, to be personally rejected by all of existence for having that faith, isn't fathomable to us. Peter railed against Jesus when he said suffering and rejection would be his calling. And he said that he would go through whatever Jesus went through to the death. But, Peter cowered as the humiliation of rejection struck a stronger chord. He finally was one of the many, one of the Everyone, who abandoned Jesus altogether. Rejection got to Peter. It does to any human.

Today we begin Holy Week. What I've tried to say is that this week isn't about the suffering in the world, or about our own suffering. It is about Jesus' total rejection by everything that God has created, so that only in Jesus' suffering and death, God could establish the means by which all of creation can return to God in wholeness and peace. The rejection that Jesus knew is unmatched in God's history. Rejection is the final stage of Jesus' suffering on the cross and it's detached from suffering. Jesus' suffering is merely the last of the stages of rejection. We can look to no one else, other than Jesus, for God's redemption of our own suffering souls. Not our suffering, nor suffering in the world. Because Jesus endured rejection by everything that exists, our lives have been made whole.

I pray that in your meditations this week, and in your worshipping on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, you may experience something of the impact of being among the Saved, not due to the suffering of Jesus, but by his ultimate sorrow of being absolutely forsaken by God and everything. Including you and me.