

## Via Dolorosa

Matthew 16:21-28

Towards the end of his ministry and his life, Jesus tries to prepare his closest friends, his disciples, for the end. As we all know, the end for Jesus wasn't pretty. At least not until the end of the end – until the end became a beginning with the resurrection. In his final hours, Jesus was arrested, interrogated, tortured, humiliated and then killed in a slow and painful crucifixion along with a thief and a murderer.

As he gets closer to Jerusalem and to the end, Jesus tries to warn and prepare his disciples because he knows it will be a very difficult time for them also. But the disciples don't take it very well. Mostly I think they don't understand what Jesus is talking about. There's a fair amount of denial going on. But even when a dim clarifying light does get through to them, they totally resist it. When Jesus tells them about the suffering that lies ahead, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. "Rebuke" is a strong word. It's a strong correction. Peter essentially says to Jesus: "Don't you talk that way! No way, don't start with the negativity. I know there are some out there who don't like you but don't give up. We're going to beat this. We're going to see victory. So just quit talking negative nonsense!"

I think in this little scene most of us would identify with Peter. Many of us would have done the same thing. When confronted with suffering, our response is: "No way José!" We don't like suffering. Most of us want nothing to do with it for ourselves or anyone else in our lives. We don't want to suffer and furthermore we expect not to have to suffer. We've gotten used to science and technology solving a lot of the problems and making life easier than it has ever been before. And for just about all of our ills we've come to expect a solution. It's amazing how illnesses like Polio have almost been eradicated from the world. Or take a disease like Type 1 Diabetes. In the past, someone diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes would not live a long life, but thanks to the miraculous discovery of insulin, living normally with that disease is quite possible. I think of little Mackenzie Lacey who underwent an 8 hour open heart surgery on Tuesday as a result of a defective aortic valve she's had since birth. For most of that 8 hours she was kept alive with a heart and lung machine while they worked on her heart. That gorgeous, lively and brave 8 year old girl has a long recovery ahead of her, but you can't help but thank God for the miracles and wonders of science that have allowed this child to grow and live, we pray, a very long and healthy life.

When we visit a developing country, like Belarus or Kenya, seeing people suffering with physical hardships is what we struggle with the most, because we know that if they were living in Canada they would likely not have to endure it. We have access to medications that can relieve pain, reduce fevers and fight infections; access to equipment, machinery and technology; we have a reliable supply of clean running water. We tend to take it all for granted, and can't begin to imagine how so many in the world survive without.

And yet if you've ever visited a developing country you have probably also been struck by the great faith and joy that people seem to have in spite of the suffering. It is a generalization, but it's something I have noticed in Zambia and in Mexico that is hard for my Canadian mind to comprehend: how people who have so little and who seem to suffer so much physically can have so much joy and faith in God's presence, God's care and God's providence. Partly I suspect that people in developing countries know that suffering is a part of life.

It's not just our culture that has a hard time with suffering. Our religion shies away from it too. One big difference between Catholic and Protestant churches is the focus of our theology. Protestants tend to focus on Easter and the Resurrection, whereas for Roman Catholics the focus is more on Good Friday and the Cross. When you see a cross in a Protestant church it is always an empty cross because Jesus is risen. We don't have crucifixes in our churches. However it is just the opposite in a Catholic Church. It's hard to find a cross that doesn't depict the crucifixion, where Jesus

is on it dying. Anyone who has been in some of the cathedrals in Europe or places like St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, can attest that a lot of the images are kind of gruesome. There is a much stronger focus on suffering in general and the suffering of Jesus in particular in the Roman Catholic Church. To the North-American Protestant it's all a bit too much. From our perspective they go overboard with the suffering. However it's possible we've gone overboard in the other direction.

"Via dolorosa" is Latin and it means "the way of suffering". The Via Dolorosa is the path that Jesus walked carrying his cross from Pilate's house to the place where he was crucified. Every year on Good Friday, Christians, mostly Catholics, walk the Via Dolorosa pilgrimage in Jerusalem. We do it here with our walk of the cross on Good Friday. For Jesus the way to life was through suffering. I don't think that 'the suffering Jesus' is the whole picture of Jesus, but it is a very significant part of who Jesus is, and if we deny that side then I think we are being like Peter, and we miss some of the fullness and richness of our faith. Peter saw walking towards suffering as giving in and as defeat, but Jesus saw suffering as the way and the path to victory.

When Peter rebukes Jesus with "By no means Lord!", Jesus' response is even stronger: "But he turned and said 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.' Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" (Matt 16:23-24)

Let me point out that Jesus did not say 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up *my* cross and follow me.' We are to take up our own cross.

As much as we tend to resist suffering and as much as we expect science and medicine to come riding into our lives like a knight with a white lab coat and save us, suffering really is a part of our lives. I know that many of you could write books on the topic. As I preach this sermon, I can't help but think of Catherine and a number of others in the congregation who live with MS. I think too of a number of women in our congregation who are living with and battling cancer, others who live with chronic pain, disability or mental illness. And there are many who struggle with the aches and strains and constraints that you get almost inevitably the longer you live. At some point in our lives we all suffer. Some experience far more suffering than others, which is so very hard to understand.

Let me be clear about a couple of things. I don't believe God causes your suffering or wants you to suffer. No loving parent enjoys watching a child suffer. Even Jesus did not want to suffer. You remember the night in the garden before he died. All his disciples fell asleep but Jesus was so upset he spent the hours in anguished prayer and the scriptures say "Being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." (Luke 22:45) Jesus prayed that this cup be taken from him—that he wouldn't have to go through with it. Jesus was no masochist. He wasn't all excited about suffering or pumped up for pain, but he surrendered to that path, knowing it was the path he was called to take and that ultimately good would come from it.

When I was in down south in Hilton Head I attended Central Church, and they had a guest preacher, a young pastor named Brian Hunter. Brian I think is roughly my age, maybe a couple of years younger. He talked about the church he planted in Tallahassee Florida. The church started with 6 people and grew to a couple thousand in just two or three years. In those early years Brian lead a mission trip to Mexico City where they worked primarily with children and youth who live in and around the city garbage dumps. When he returned to the U.S. he was quite sick with high fevers that they couldn't bring down. Eventually they realized that he had contracted a bacterial infection and they worked hard to fight it. However, the bacterial infection ended up causing rheumatoid arthritis, so that now he spends every waking hour in great pain. As you can imagine, at the beginning he really struggled with this. Here he was on top of his game, working hard for the Lord and now he'd been struck down. He spent several years mostly in bed trying to recover and deal with the pain.



Brian still leads that church in Tallahassee, but today both he and his church are very different. His relationship with God is richer and deeper than ever before. He has a far more mature understanding that following Jesus is really about humble service – about picking up your cross and following and not about *victory, perfection, success or 'the American Dream'*. Their church now has a

powerful ministry with a school down the road where the kids who attend were sent there from schools which had given up on them. They mostly come from incredibly poor and dysfunctional homes. On parent-teacher interview nights, you can count the number of parents who come on one hand. This church does breakfast programmes and tutoring and mentoring; they also do a lot with and for the tired burned-out staff. They spend a lot of time just loving the students and staff and it has made an enormous difference, not just to that school but to the church.

“The funny thing”, said Brian, “was that that school was always there, we just didn’t notice it before when we were focused on growing”. Would Brian wish his suffering on anyone? No way. But tremendous blessings have come to him in so many ways since he decided to pick up his cross and follow.

What is your cross? What is your burden that you resist and want no part of that you just want fixed, or banished? Though we wouldn’t chose it, life hands us struggles and burdens that we are called to say ‘Yes’ to. Not ‘Yes!! Woo Hoo!’ but ‘Yes, not my will but yours be done’. This does not mean we chose sickness over health or become a victim instead of a victor. Actually, it’s just the opposite. I believe that when we accept and pick up our cross and follow Jesus, that is precisely when we cease to become a victim. That is when health and blessings can come. We need to surrender what we understand victory to look like and to surrender what we understand health to look like. Remember, we not only accept and pick up our cross: we are also called to *follow, not lead*, so we surrender the path that we take as well. Sometimes the path leads through very dark, shadow-of-death types of valleys before we experience green pastures.

A seminary professor once said, "You North Americans are so spoiled. You think that suffering is bad. That is not always true. Suffering is never comfortable but in this world it is unavoidable, and sometimes, if you face it rightly, it can even be beneficial. Nietzsche was playing with truth when he said, 'What ever does not kill us makes us stronger.' Suffering becomes destructive when it drives a person into one's self, isolating them from God and those they love. But suffering can also be positive if faith and love create the power to overcome it. The heroes and heroines of history are not those who took it easy, who had it good, but those who struggled and who overcame seemingly insurmountable odds.

Victor Frankel, the Austrian neurologist and Holocaust survivor, reflected on suffering and our attitude to it in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way. The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even in the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to life.”



I walked the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain a couple of years ago. On a wall next to my bunk one night I saw these words written in pen: “*Sin dolores, no hay gloria*”. “Without suffering, there is no glory.” I have heard people say to me “I wouldn’t wish my suffering on anyone else, and yet I wouldn’t trade either.” This morning I invite you to look at your cross, at your suffering and your burdens with new eyes. I invite you to look at them through God’s loving eyes. You are invited to say yes and pick up your cross, not someone else’s. Some of you are very good at picking up other people’s burdens, but that’s too much to carry. Strangely, it’s as we surrender and carry our own cross that we are best able to make a difference to others and in the world. If you say yes to your own, the burden will be lighter than you feared, and you will never walk alone. No matter how dark the valley or how steep the path, you are not alone.

If you say yes and look up and follow, you will see amazing blessings along the way, blessings for yourself and even more importantly, blessings for many others.

Thanks be to God. Amen.