

The gospel of suffering

Hebrews 12:1-13

February 10, 2008

And so we begin our Lenten journey. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, walking the path of obedience all the way, all the way to the end that awaits him there, and he says, *Follow me!*

Will you? Do you dare to? It is not an easy way. It is a hard way, a way marked by suffering. You may want to go another way. You may want to just stay home!

Why would you want to choose a way marked by suffering? But your way already is marked by suffering, isn't it? I don't have to ask if you suffer or not, because I know you do. Each one of you has suffered, some of you more and some of you less.

But that's not really a fair statement, is it: "some of you more and some of you less"? Which of us can fairly measure what another person suffers? I don't know what it is like to be you. I don't know how your pain feels to you. I don't know what suffering you bear easily and what suffering threatens to overwhelm you and break you.

Maybe for me standing alone is no big deal, but for you it is terrifying. Maybe criticism just rolls off your back, but breaks mine. Maybe for you failure is just part of the process, but for me it is paralyzing. Maybe I bear grief lightly, but you are crushed under its weight.

I do not know how much you have suffered or what your suffering feels like to you, but I do know you have suffered. You have suffered grief, loss, failure, disappointment ... hardship, pain, peril, loneliness ... heartache, heartbreak, rejection, betrayal. I know you have suffered because suffering is the common experience of every human being, believer and unbeliever alike, Christian and non-Christian alike.

But there is for you who choose to follow Jesus another level of suffering too. You suffer by living against the tide of popular culture, by believing against the tide of popular wisdom, by acting against the tide of popular sentiment, by refusing to go with the tide of popular morality. You may suffer scorn or ridicule. You may be pushed aside or considered a lightweight. You may suffer loss because you won't play the game. Or you may be judged disloyal or unpatriotic or no true friend because you answer to a different One.

I know you have suffered, as a human being and as a Christian. The question then is not whether or not you will suffer. The question is what will it mean? Can you draw meaning out of your suffering or is your suffering by definition meaning-less? And where does your suffering take you? Nowhere? To nowhere, except one day, to death?

What does it mean and where does it lead? Do you want to know? Do you want to go with Jesus, to take the way of suffering and find out where it leads? Do you dare to? That's the way I propose to take with you over the course of the next seven weeks of the season of Lent. Our guide on the way is the One who has gone before us in that way ... Jesus. And our maps for the journey will be the Bible and a book by the Danish author and Christian, Soren Kierkegaard, entitled the *Gospel of Suffering*.

The gospel of suffering! That's a strange title! Isn't "gospel of suffering" an oxymoron? "Gospel" means "good news" and how can suffering be good news? How can your suffering be good news?

It is good news because when we suffer, we know we are following Jesus. Kierkegaard says that from the worldly point of view, suffering is an indication that we are going the wrong way and need to change direction, but from the point of view of faith, suffering is evidence that we are going the right way!

On that way where [we] follow Christ, he writes, the height of suffering is the height of glory.

And it is good because its meaning has changed. Every one of us suffers and will suffer. Faith doesn't change that, but faith changes the way we understand the meaning of our suffering. Faith turns the heavy burden of suffering into a burden light and easy to bear, because faith sees the burden as a good thing. Kierkegaard illustrates this by saying:

When a man ... is at a point of sinking under the heavy burden he bears, but that burden is his dearest possession, then he says that it is a light burden ...

And again,

When one who loves is in distress at sea, and at the point of drowning because of the weight of her whom he loves and whom he wants to save, then his burden is certainly heavy, and yet -- yes, ask him! -- yet so unspeakably light ...

Faith does nothing to change our circumstances or end our suffering, he says, rather faith changes us. It changes us by changing the way we think of our suffering, by teaching us to consider it good and good for us, because it conforms us more and more to Jesus.

And that is a faith that moves mountains. Kierkegaard writes:

It is said of faith that it can move mountains. Even the heaviest suffering, however, cannot be heavier than a mountain, for the strongest way of expressing it is to say: Suffering weighs on a man like a mountain. But if a sufferer really believes that the suffering is good for him -- why then he moves mountains. And so we cannot doubt that there are those who in every step they take, are moving a mountain, who, every day they live, are moving a mountain. To move the mountain one must go beneath it, and thus, ah thus, does the sufferer submit to his heavy burden. This is what is hard. But the power of faith to endure under this suffering, the belief that it is for his good, lifts the mountain and moves it ...

That's the way I propose to go with you: the way of faith, the way of faith that chooses to go where Jesus has already gone, the way of obedience, the way of suffering; the way of suffering that is meaningful because it is good, because it conforms us to Jesus, because it teaches us discipline and humility and dependence on God; because it teaches us what we cannot do and what we cannot change and because it teaches us what we can do and what we can change which is to learn to bear our burden lightly.

And it is a way that leads to joy!

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross ...

Because of joy, the burden is light. So may we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and learn from him how to bear our suffering lightly ... because of joy.

What joy can be greater than to dare to choose the best way, the way to the highest?

And our sufferings that are the signposts that mark that way. Do you dare to take it?