

The path of obedience

Luke 10:25-37

March 9, 2008

In the story Jesus told, who suffers?

Who does not suffer? The priest and the Levite do not suffer. They choose deliberately to avoid suffering, to stay out of the way of suffering.

The mugged traveler suffers, through no fault of his own, unless he can be held at fault for choosing to travel that way on that day. He takes the risk of living, of choosing to walk the road from Jerusalem to Jericho instead of staying home huddled in a corner, and on the way, calamity befalls him. He suffers an accident. He suffers ... accidentally.

This is what we usually think of when we think of suffering: calamity, misfortune, hardship, sickness, loss, disappointment, hurt that befall us "on the way." We don't go looking for suffering; it comes to us at unexpected times and in unexpected ways, but, of course, we know suffering is always a possibility. The poor man traveling alone from Jerusalem to Jericho was unfortunate enough to be mugged along the way.

But the Samaritan suffers, too! In what ways does he suffer? He suffers the loss of his time and his money. He suffers a change of plans, the inconvenience of having to go out of his way. But, most of all, he knows the suffering that comes with pity, the suffering that comes with seeing and touching and being touched by this violated man. The Samaritan "lets suffering in." He makes another's suffering his own. In his empathy, he too feels pain and anger and sorrow.

And ... who knows? Maybe the Samaritan will suffer in other ways, too. Maybe this was a hate crime, or a gang crime, or an act of revenge, something personal, and maybe helping the victim will put him at risk, too.

Or maybe too many good Samaritans would be bad for the robbing business, raising awareness of the problem and causing the Jerusalem authorities to take notice and to post security details along the road, so this good Samaritan will just have to be taken care of ... permanently!

So the Samaritan suffers, too. But here's the important thing: this is suffering of a different order altogether, not something that befalls us, but something we choose!

We all choose a path. Each of the characters in Jesus' story chose a path. The traveler chose the path from Jerusalem to Jericho. The priest and the Levite chose paths that detoured widely around suffering and kept them free from danger ... and bother.

The Samaritan chose the path of obedience. He knew the command: *Love your neighbor as you love yourself* ... and he did! He chose the path of obedience, the path of love, and put himself in the way of suffering.

But when suffering is chosen, its character and its effects are dramatically transformed. When suffering befalls us, when suffering comes to us accidentally, unexpectedly, unfortunately, we are beleaguered by it. We are pulled down and disheartened and left defeated and all we can do is ask, *Why? Why? Why?*

But when suffering is chosen, when we choose to go that way, then ... it is chosen! Suffering doesn't befall me; I choose it. Suffering doesn't surprise me along the way; I have chosen to go its way.

Isn't that empowering? Suffering doesn't overtake me or pull me down or discourage me. I meet it intentionally, with courage, with pity, and with compassion. This is the joy in the way of suffering, that it is the way I have chosen to go, the way Jesus chose to go, the path of obedience, the path that leads ... to life.

What the Samaritan did, we can do, too. Isn't that the point of Jesus' story? We too can choose to turn aside, to turn toward suffering, to see it and touch it and be touched by it, to feel pity and to show love.

And when we do, like the Samaritan, we will suffer, too. Because we choose to feel the sorrow and the anger and the neglect and the despair, instead of ignoring it.

Because we choose to rearrange our priorities and plans, to reallocate our resources, to reserve the time it takes to be with, really be with, another human in their suffering.

Because we sacrifice our freedom to choose any path in order to choose the path of obedience. But we do so freely!

Because there will be those who will not understand, some of them enemies, some of them friends ... people who take a wide detour around suffering and will not understand why you would choose to go its way ... people who have a vested interest in the systems and institutions that create and prolong the suffering ... people who want to keep their eyes closed to suffering and cannot tolerate your persistent reminder that, yes, it does exist.

When you choose the path of obedience, you will know suffering, not because you welcome it or desire it, but because you choose to go that way, to go Jesus' way, to put yourself where he put himself -- with those who are suffering.

And you will know joy, as you follow that path all the way, all the way through the suffering and through death itself to the end, to that precious end the Teacher of Law was asking about in the first place, eternal life! Eternal life is the end to which the path of obedience leads, but life that is eternal -- life that is real, life that has real substance! -- is also the way itself ...