

What we deserve

Luke 23:41

February 24, 2008

As a minister of the gospel, I am in the truth business. I am in the truth business, the business of telling the truth, the business of proclaiming the truth.

I'm not in the business of giving advice or the business of dispensing personal insights gleaned from popular psychology. I'm not in the business of boosting your capacity for positive thinking or in the business of suggesting paths toward a happier and healthier and more fulfilling life. I am in the truth business, the business of telling the truth ... whatever it is, whatever it means.

Does that claim -- to be in the truth business -- seem arrogant? It may be, which is why the most critical virtue for any minister of the gospel is a profound humility.

A profound humility that readily admits everything it doesn't know and that it cannot take any credit for what it does know!

A deep humility that understands that truth is not something I possess, something of mine that I pass on to you, but something to which I point, something we look for and listen for together, something we seek and keep on seeking together until we find it ... or until it finds us!

A chastened humility that recognizes that some -- or even many -- who have claimed to be in the truth business have really only served themselves and have led people no closer to any truth that matters.

A wise humility that knows that we need each other, knows that we correct each other, knows that God's Spirit is given not to one or another of us, but to all of us, knows that the Spirit speaks the truth to us through each other.

So I -- so we -- come to the business of telling and proclaiming the truth with humility. But we come to it! And we come to it with boldness, believing that there is truth to be found, that there is truth to be told!

We come to it with humility and boldness ... and courage, because the truth can be difficult to hear and difficult to tell. Like the truth about suffering! Why should we have to talk about suffering? It would be so much easier to talk about happier things, so much easier to ask you to look on the bright side, so much easier to tell you that if you have enough faith everything will work out for you and you will be spared a life of great suffering.

But it wouldn't be true! We do suffer. We all suffer and we all will suffer, and faith must teach us the truth about our suffering if we are not to be ruined by it! When we are honest about it, when we tell the truth about it, we realize that suffering is not an unfortunate intrusion into our otherwise blissful lives, but suffering is woven into the very fabric of every one of our lives, not something peripheral, but something essential to who we are.

And Jesus suffered! The one in whose steps we aim to follow suffered! Wouldn't it be most peculiar if we who call ourselves followers of Jesus would expect to trip through our lives without a struggle and without a care, when he suffered throughout his life? We are called, in the New Testament, the body of Christ. But what happens to Christ's body?

And so our task as followers of Jesus is not to deny our suffering, or to ignore it, or even to try to avoid it. Our task is to make sense of it, to draw on our faith to give it meaning, so that our suffering too, like Jesus' suffering, serves a purpose and yields a blessing. Our task is to tell the truth about it.

And so we are ...

We proclaim the truth that our suffering is good. Good because it identifies us with Jesus, because it is an unmistakable sign that we are on the right path! Good because it teaches us discipline and resolve and humility and constant dependence on God. Good because it teaches us what we cannot do and cannot change, and teaches us what we can do and what we can change which is to bear our burden lightly and with joy.

We proclaim the truth that suffering teaches us obedience and that obedience builds up faith. Suffering trains faith and disciplines faith and refines faith and confirms faith. Suffering proves, not just to God, but to us, that our faith is genuine and substantial and lasting.

But now we come to the next step on our journey along the way of suffering, and it is a hard step! We come now to a truth that is hard to hear and even harder to tell, but, if we will hear it, can, like the rest, bring us closer to joy! Could it be the truth that we suffer because we deserve it? And if we do, what does that mean?

A man hangs, dying, on a cross of his own, planted next to the cross on which Jesus dies, and he speaks to a still another condemned man nailed to a cross on the other side of Jesus: "We are getting what we deserve."

Was he right? Was he telling the truth? And if he was, what did it mean for him to say it? It means this: in that moment of excruciating pain and in the face of imminent death, instead of trying to justify himself (for whose benefit? God's?), and instead of crying out in bitter complaint against the unfairness of the universe in general and of God in particular, he admits his own guilt and puts himself at the mercy of Jesus: "Jesus, remember me!"

Isn't this a joyful thing? Isn't this a hopeful thing? To depend, not on himself, not on justifying himself, but to depend on Jesus' kindness? To think that in the midst of the greatest suffering and in the face of imminent death, he can ask for, and even expect to receive, God's mercy?

And it means this: he has something to do! Even when his life is nearly over, he has something to do! Because he deserves what he suffers, in the midst of his suffering he has something he can do. He can confess what he is. He can repent what he has done. Even now he can choose to bend his will to God's will instead of indulging his own. There is something he can do and there is hope that, by God's grace, he can become what he has not yet been and, by God's grace, he can receive what he has not deserved.

But if he were to think that his suffering is undeserved, what terror that would be! His life and its end would be mere caprice at best or terrible cruelty at worst, and there would be no hope of help and no hope of change and nothing he can do. That's the point of Kierkegaard's story about the horse:

For when we see the horse, already, it may be, in distress, on which too great a burden has been laid, when we see it make a last attempt, strain every sinew to drag its load, then we give it sympathy, but also have the hope that it may succeed. But if you saw a horse in cruel agony and straining every sinew, and yet saw no task, no load, would it not be that this were a sight to evoke despair?

The most terrible suffering is to have nothing to do!

So that's the story of the man who was crucified with Jesus, but what about you? What if you were put in his place? What if it was you hanging there next to Jesus, dying a slow and painful death? (May you be spared any suffering like that!)

What would you say? What would you say to Jesus? What would you say to anyone who would listen? Would you say: "We are getting what we deserve"? And if you did, would it be the truth? Isn't it true that we could put any one of us in his place and his words in our mouths would be the truth?

And isn't it true that that would be joy for us? Because it would mean that we do not suffer frivolously, senselessly, cruelly, but because, before God our judge, we are guilty! We deserve it! Which means we do not pin our hopes of healing and blessing and glory on convincing God that we deserve it, but that we pin our hopes on God's love alone!

And it would be joy for us because it would mean we have something to do. We can confess what we are! We can rejoice in the fact that we are not God, but that there is a God who is what we are not, and who can make us into what we shall be! We can learn and we can grow. We can learn obedience and we can grow in faithfulness. We can learn how to love God back and how to love God back by loving each other.

Wouldn't it be joy to know that we suffer ... because we deserve it?

Now Kierkegaard inserts a word of caution here, counseling us not to think this means that our suffering is punishment for particular sins. Jesus says flat out that isn't true, and Job's friends were wrong about him and his suffering. Job was a good man and his sufferings were not punishment for this sin or that sin. When you suffer, you need not look for a cause. The cause is already there!

And that is why Job does repent:

*I talked about things I did not understand,
about marvels too great for me to know.
You told me to listen while you spoke
and to try to answer your questions.
In the past I knew only what others had told me,
but now I have seen you with my own eyes.
So I am ashamed of all I have said
and repent in dust and ashes.*

The key to understanding this is not to understand who Job is and what Job has done, but to understand who God is and how Job sees himself in the light of God's presence! In the presence of God's holiness, we realize our unholiness, however and whoever we are. In the presence of God's greatness, we recognize our smallness. In the presence of God's power, we recognize our weakness. In the presence of God's strength, we recognize our frailty.

In the presence of God, we see that we are unfinished, incomplete, not yet fully formed, not yet entirely beautiful, not yet at the end of the path of obedience, but still on the way. But that's the joy of it! We are still on the way ... and our suffering is the way.