

ARE YOU ABLE?

Matthew 20:20-28

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Are you able? We've been asking that question this Holy Week. *Are you able to drink the cup I am going to drink?* asked Jesus as the disciples shuffled for position. Can we walk the road Jesus walked, the Via Delarosa, the way of sorrows? Can we eat the bread of brokenness? Can we take up the cross and follow Jesus?

Sobering questions, serious questions, the kind of questions that crack open a hardened heart and lay bare the tendons of the spiritual life. The kind of questions to be asked on Maundy Thursday.

In a Tom Wilson cartoon, *Ziggy* is looking unusually sad and deflated. "I went to the school of hard knocks," explains *Ziggy*, "and right now I'm doing post-graduate work."

Perhaps the statement of Jesus in this story is as telling as the question. Jesus said to them "*You will indeed drink from my cup.*" Tonight we remember he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Yes, we have tasted that cup, all its bitter dregs.

To live is to hurt. Sometimes it is to hurt a lot. There are times in our lives when we are not having the time of our lives. We bring to church the pain of disease, the loneliness of divorce, the sting of death, the stress of adolescence, the agony of betrayal, the ache of rejection. All people go to the school of hard knocks. Many do graduate work.

SUFFERING HAPPENS

Suffering is not an elective course in the school of life. It is essential curriculum of life. Suffering happens.

I don't enjoy pain. In fact I hate it. I don't like conflict. I would rather attend parties than funerals. I prefer weddings to divorce proceedings—they are a lot more fun.

I have a problem with the glorification of trouble on tele-vision. Shame and sorrow, conflict and chaos have become the common commodities of multiple news documentaries. Sometimes I want to scream to the broadcasters—turn off the lights, put away the mikes—let these people face their loss in peace. Nevertheless, the evening news ought to teach us that—

SUFFERING HAPPENS. Never morning wore to evening but some hearts break, a heart just as sensitive as yours or mine. A child is neglected, some teenager is

raped, some car wrecks, some disease strikes, some family fights, some friends stop speaking to each other, or some country goes to war.

WHY ARE WE SURPRISED WHEN IT HAPPENS TO US?

There is another *Ziggy* cartoon that says, “Whenever I ask, ‘Why me?’ There’s always another voice that says, ‘Exactly who else did you have in mind?’”

The first time I was being treated for cancer, a nurse addressed me in the waiting room as Mr. Olds. When I stepped behind the office door she said immediately, “I would have called you Rev. Olds but ministers are not supposed to get sick.” Since when?

One of Steven Spielberg’s best movies is *Saving Private Ryan*. Like the passion of Christ, the horrors of war some of you fought, is more pain than my mind can comprehend or my emotions can bear. A private bounces off the boat for the invasion of Normandy kissing his cross. He survives by the philosophy of “Praise God and Pass the Ammunition.” He quotes Psalms as he guns down the enemy. *The Lord is my strength and my salvation*, he says to the popping of his machine gun. What is Spielberg going to do with this character? Will his religion get him through? In the final attack, sitting in a church tower, a tank blows him to bits. Suffering happens, whatever your name, whatever your religion, whatever your faith.

JESUS SUFFERED

Boyhood buddies ran Him out of town and tried to kill Him. Best friends betrayed Him and denied Him. On this night, our Lord sweats drops of blood as he prays in the garden for this cup to pass from him. The cup of suffering is more than our Savior can stand to bear. Let us never forget that the nails were real, the spear pierced deep, the jeers were loud, the death was bloody.

Someone jests about religion, “Get Real.” On a Maundy Thursday night and a Good Friday we might reply “How real do you want to get?” Jesus suffered.

Upon that cross of Jesus, my eyes at times can see
The very dying form of one who suffered there for me.

Dorothy Sayers says for whatever reason God chose to make us as we are—limited, suffering, subject to sorrow and death, He had the honesty and courage to take His own medicine. He expects nothing from us that He has not exacted from Himself.

So our Lord suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He suffered, not to save us from suffering, but to teach us how to bear it. For He knew there was no life without suffering. Suffering happens.

SUFFERING SHAPES US.

In suffering we brush up against a life process that we did not create, would not

choose, and cannot comprehend. If we could escape even one minute of it, we would. But since we can't, we are left to decide what we will do with what is. Is that not the question of Jesus on Maundy Thursday night? Suffering shapes us. It will make us bitter or better; it will shrink your soul or it will stretch your soul.

A chaplain in a nursing home observed "the life circumstances of chronic complainers are not significantly different from the quietly thankful folk that you meet in nursing homes. Both suffered, but in wholly different worlds. The thankful people saw life as a series of challenges to be faced. The victims saw life as a tale of repeated woes. Suffering shapes us.

People notice what you do with pain. They measure every millimeter of your hair. They observe every action of your body. They listen for every thought of your soul. People could care less about your successes but they notice how you handle suffering.

Paul says in Romans 5:3 *We rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*

SUFFERING TEACHES US PERSEVERANCE

Hupomone—fortitude, courage, endurance, guts, spirit that won't give up.

Sir Winston Churchill took three years to get through the eighth grade because he had trouble learning English. Years later he went to Oxford to deliver the commencement address. He had his usual props—a cigar, cane, and top hat. As he stepped to the podium to thunderous applause he removed his cigar, set his top hat on the podium, gazed at the waiting audience and said, "Never give up." Seconds passed and he repeated, "Never give up." And a third time he said the final phrase of that speech "Never give up," then picked up his cigar, put on his hat, steadied himself with his cane and walked off the platform.

O Soul near despair in the lowlands of strife
Never give up, never give up, never give up.

Another saying of Churchill's sustained me during my most recent hospitalization. Nurses even took it to share with others on the floor. Churchill said, "If you are going through hell...keep on going." Persevere. Perseverance produces character, said Paul.

CHARACTER Dokime—metal that has passed through the fire so that impurities have been purified from it.

I can't prove it but I wonder—since we have assumed ease to be an entitlement, have we produced more characters than people of character in our day?

Helen Keller said that character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experiences of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

In my home office I have the book and a couple reminders of the children's book, The Velveteen Rabbit. I just like to be reminded of it. Animals in the nursery discuss life. Rabbit says to Skin Horse "What's real? Is it something that you wind up or a stick coming out of us?" Skin Horse says, "Real isn't how you are made, it's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long time, you become real." Rabbit asks, "Does it hurt?" Skin Horse answers "Sometimes, but when you are real, you don't mind being hurt." Rabbit asks, "Does it happen all at once?" "No," says Skin Horse. "It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. By the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all. Because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." Perseverance produces character. Character produces hope.

Cancer has made you a better person—I hope so, never let a trouble go to waste.

HOPE

Hope is faith regarding the future. Hope looks at the shattered remnants of a storm-tossed soul and envisions a life that has even more purpose and meaning than existed before. Hope is rooted in a goodness that is deeper than suffering. It is immersing ourselves in God, whatever the circumstances may be.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, was asked "You have experienced so much suffering, yet you radiate so much peace and joy—how do you do it?" He said, "In my meditation I allow all the suffering of my people and our oppressors to enter into the depth of my heart, and there to be transformed into compassion."

The most caring, compassionate, concerned people I know are those who have walked through the valley of the shadows of death and learned to fear no evil. Jesus was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. Jesus said, *You will indeed drink from my cup.*

Suffering happens. Face it, embrace it, learn from it. Let it make you and mold you into a compassionate person until you become a wounded healer for others. That is my prayer.

Amen.

