Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Second Sunday in Lent

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VIA DOLOROSA Mark 8:31–38; 14:1–9

In the Old City of Jerusalem, Christian visitors often are seen walking the *Via Dolorosa*, which represents the path Jesus took as he carried his cross to his crucifixion. Along the way, there are signs, which mark the fourteen stations of the cross. Of course, we cannot know the actual path Jesus took, but over the centuries pilgrims have walked the *Via Dolorosa* as if they were walking the path Jesus walked. *Via Dolorosa* is from the Latin meaning “Way of Grief,” “Way of Sorrow,” “Way of Suffering,” or simply “Painful Way.” Pilgrims who walk the way are often seen carrying wooden crosses, which are at the end of the *Via Dolorosa* are deposited outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, I have wondered about the inner reality of those who carry their crosses along the *Via Dolorosa*. I imagine that the outward act of carrying a cross is often linked to an inner reality of personal pain and suffering.

Dr. Susan Smith, the well known preacher and author, in conversation with Bill Moyers at the Chautauqua Institute in July this past summer, shared her observation that American Christian churches, both black churches and mainline churches, are either hesitant or incapable, or both, of dealing with the inner pain and suffering of their members. Churches mirror the officially optimistic American culture surrounding us, a culture that is notorious in its avoidance of any talk of the suffering that arises from the human experience of death or loss, or from violence and racism and poverty. We are a “boot strap” culture. You just need to leave your misery and your pain behind and pull yourselves up by your bootstraps. So let’s keep our religion “positive” by all means. The so-called prosperity gospel, so popular in American evangelical Christian culture, is a great example of a suffering-free religion. God wants us to be happy and wealthy and successful, so let’s keep our eyes on the prize.

In a way, Peter in the gospel story is representative of this point of view. To be sure, he was not into anything like the prosperity gospel, but he was certainly attracted to a suffering-free gospel. For him, it was inconceivable that the Messiah could be a suffering Messiah. He conceived the Messiah as a conquering savior who would free the Jews from Roman rule and usher in a new age. Just after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins to teach the disciples that he “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” “He said this quite openly,” the text declares. (Mark 8:31–32) This is unacceptable to Peter, so unacceptable that he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus then, looking at all the disciples just to make sure they hear, rebukes Peter. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Mark 8:33)

Why did Peter rebuke Jesus? Is it just because he could not conceive of a suffering Messiah? Or, was there something else going on in him? It may be that Peter could not relate to the suffering of Jesus because he himself had not yet had his own experience of suffering. Or, perhaps if he had indeed suffered, he had not yet come to terms with it.

Richard Rohr in the book we are discussing in the Lenten Study, *Falling Upward*, describes how in the first half of our lives, suffering is often not in the picture. We are so busy establishing ourselves, our boundaries, our certainties, our vocational direction, and our families, that we do not give much thought to suffering. It is in the second half of life that we begin to experience our fallings, whether it be a death, a sickness, a divorce, or our disillusionment with all that we have achieved in the first half of our lives. Of course, the young are not immune from suffering. We think of the teenagers from Parkland, Florida, who lost close friends in the recent shooting. They know all about suffering. They will have to come to work through it, as best they can. But our experience of suffering does not always mean that we are willing to come to terms with it. Richard Rohr describes our fallings as encounters with imperfection. There is something in us that resists the experience of a downward path into suffering. Rohr says that our resistance “is so great that it could be called outright denial, even among sincere Christians. He writes, “*The human ego prefers anything, just about anything, to falling or changing or dying.* The ego is that part of you that loves the status quo, even when it is not working.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

A mature faith is one that is nurtured in the experience of human suffering. It is a faith that knows that all is not well with the world, and that suffering is an inescapable part of life. It is a faith that is given birth when we allow ourselves to dwell in the experience of suffering until we realize that it can become the source of growth, that it can nurture within us a depth of faith we had not known before, that because we have suffered, we are able to give more and be more compassionate. We have moved to a faith that in the end can carry us through the valley of the shadow of death.

Perhaps Peter, when he resists the thought that Jesus is going to suffer, has not yet reached that point of mature faith. I have come to appreciate the contrast between Peter, here at this point in Mark’s Gospel, and the woman who enters the house of Simon the leper and anoints the head of Jesus with the costly ointment of nard. Peter has a name but she does not. Jesus rebukes Peter and Simon’s houseguests rebuke the woman, but not Jesus. He commends her. In fact, Jesus bestows upon her an honor no one else ever receives. Of her, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Mark 14:9)

What are we to make of this story of the woman anointing the feet of Jesus? One thing is clear. It is often the nameless of our world who show us the way. The woman with no name is the one knew that Jesus was about to die. She alone was able to enter into his suffering. She alone knew that his death would be accomplished so hastily that there would be no opportunity to anoint his body for burial. And so she anoints his body now.

I suspect that she knew all about suffering in her own life, and that is why she could relate to the suffering of Jesus. I cannot stop thinking about those teenagers from the Parkland school, whose names we have never known until now, who have become the teachers of those who have names, beginning with the President of the United States. The young man who is mourning the death of his close friend who himself helped save his younger brother before he died spoke directly to the President Trump at the White House. As tears streamed down his face, he questioned how anyone could buy an AR 15 with an expired ID. And then he asked the President if he knew how many children in Australia had died since the school shooting that occurred there in 1999. The President obviously did not know the answer. The young man, weeping still, made the sign of “zero” with his hand. Not one life of a school child has been lost in Australia since 1999 simply because political leaders did what they needed to do.

I don’t know whether or not that young man is a Christian, but if he is, he will have no trouble relating to Good Friday this year.

But why is it so important for us to come to terms with our own suffering so that we can enter into the suffering of Jesus? Simply because it is in the suffering of Jesus that God is most fully and intimately revealed. In Jesus, human and divine, we come to know that God is a God who suffers. “Only a suffering God can help,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. God is a God who suffers with Jesus on the cross and with us in our own times of suffering. From the suffering and death of Jesus, new life was given birth. And so it is that in our own suffering that God grants us hope and newness of life. Or as Richard Rohr would say, it is in our falling that we can reach up by the grace of God to become the authentic human beings we were created to be. Nothing could be more pleasing to the God who gave us life than that. So may it be. Amen.

1. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) xxiii, xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)