



Wednesday in Holy Week

Joyfully

RCL: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

Accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time? Don't you wish you could be the kind of person who could do what our collect says? You know, the kind of person who turns the other cheek, who never gets pulled into the petty, who responds to hate with love? Just how are we to accept sufferings joyfully? And... does Jesus really want us to?

The sufferings of the present time seem overwhelming. For many, the past year was horrible. Just last week, we marked the one-year anniversary of the first Covid-19 case in the U.S. Too many of us have an empty chair around the table, reminding us of the loved ones we've lost to this disease. You yourself might have lost a job, opportunities, joy, a sense of community. You might have experienced micro- and macro-aggressions, been ridiculed or bullied, been belittled or gaslighted or misunderstood. All of us, at some point this year, have felt lonely, scared, depressed, or anxious.

Throughout the hurt, you might have heard others say something such as, "There has always been evil in the world," or "It's always been hard, the hard things just change." Perhaps you've heard this from the generations of our elders, or that great cloud of witnesses, the saints of scripture. You may have been told that the oft-repeated word "unprecedented" has been too-liberally thrown around in this era's particular crises. Our own tradition reminds us that the sufferings have always been here. And it can be a helpful reminder that, like us, our ancestors have also struggled to carry them with grace.

For example, Isaiah. The excerpt from the prophet Isaiah we read today comes from the segment of the writings sometimes called the songs of the Suffering Servant. It was written at the beginning of the Babylonian Exile, when the nation of Israel was held in captivity and servitude, exiled from their Promised Land. The "Servant" voice in this passage fills a familiar place: calling on God for help navigating a difficult, lonely, hopeless world, while also trusting God's limitless grace and power. The servant attributes this wisdom to God. Because of God, the servant "may know how to sustain the weary with a word." It seems a bit aspirational, doesn't it, this desire to be able to suffer joyfully?

Our prayers on good days might sound similar to those of the prophet – seeking God’s wisdom and strength to navigate exceedingly difficult moments. Our prayers on hard days might sound more fraught, perhaps like the prayers of the average people to whom the prophets were always prophesying!

“Is it okay to ask God to smite my enemies? Or do I have to pray for patience and forgiveness?”

Is it okay to ask God to stifle an irritating voice, to shut down an oppressive ego, to cause failure for a competitor? Or, in the words of the psalmist, must I “let those who seek my life be ashamed and altogether dismayed”?

Yes. Yes. Yes. God’s answer to the prayers of prophets and to people like you and me is always some kind of yes. God is able to hold all these prayers and respond to them by saturating us with grace. Grace, God’s one-way, no-strings-attached love for broken people who deserve anything but forgiveness.

Thankfully, the stories of our ancestors also include people who are broken, petty, hurting, and flawed – characters to whom it is easy to relate! Judas, perhaps one of the most demonized characters in our narrative, is also so explicitly human. How often have we betrayed Jesus out of ambition and selfishness – like Judas? How often have we denied Christ and our relationship with Jesus – like Peter? How often have we ridiculed or hurt Jesus – like the Roman centurions at the Cross?

In the Gospel of John, we get a glimpse into how Christ himself interacts with the brokenness of humanity. In the story, Jesus publicly acknowledges that one of his disciples – one of the friends with whom he travels, eats, sleeps, learns, shares – will betray him. The rest of the group is aghast, self-defensive, accusatory. But Jesus (perhaps calmly, perhaps sadly) accepts Judas’ fallenness. He tells him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

Jesus’ response to Judas is a blessing. Yes, Judas. It’s as if Jesus is telling us, “You are human and I can’t expect otherwise.” We love to demonize Judas, place him as the scapegoat, the personification of the betrayal of humanity against God. We love to compare ourselves to Judas, reminding ourselves that we would never stoop to the wretchedness of betraying Christ himself! But the truth is, Judas is as human as the rest of us, our sibling in brokenness and pain. How often with our selfishness, ambition, and scarcity mindset do we indeed betray Christ in ourselves and in our neighbor?

The author of the letter to the Hebrews encourages the Christian community to focus on the community, the way of love, the example of Jesus, instead of lying in the ditch of our brokenness. To “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” could be an expectation to live entirely without sin. But it could also be an invitation to not let sin muddle us down – to confess and repent of our sin and then to continue the Christian life. The grace of Christ Jesus means we don’t have to tally up our mistakes, our shortcomings, or dwell in guilt and self-flagellation. It means we can do the work of repenting, repairing, and reconciling, and then *moving on*. The gift of Jesus’ no-exception love means that we are not expected to

grow weary with our shame and sin. It means we can feel the power and connection from our great cloud of witnesses, and be rejuvenated to persevere, to try again, to walk in the way of love.

Take a moment right now to honor your humanity, indeed, that is exactly what Jesus did at the Incarnation. If our God chose to feel the pangs and pains of a human body, certainly, so can we. By feeling the sorrow and fatigue that is intertwined with human experience, we honor our humanity. Can you honor the human? Can you honor everything your body, mind, heart, and soul have experienced this year, this month, this week, this day, this lifetime? Can you channel God's grace and comfort, feel the love that comes not despite, but *because of* your humanity?

The grace of God is greater than the grace that we muster for one another. Thank God that God's expectation is not, in fact, for us to be perfect, but to be in relationship with Grace itself. Thank God that Jesus still loves us, still accompanies us. Despite *and* because of our very human brokenness, God offers all of us limitless grace.

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