



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

The Portal of Grace

February 22, 2015

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

I Peter 3: 13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

A number of years ago, I took a course in water color painting. I must say that I enjoyed it thoroughly, but that Wyeth and other masters needn't fear my prowess. I remember showing some of my paintings to a friend and foolishly asked, "What do you think?" In retrospect, it put him on the spot. Did I really want to hear the truth or was I fishing for a compliment. His response was classic. "Brent, I don't think you have suffered enough." Ahh the suffering artist who is able to take the pains of life and transform them into a masterpiece. I hadn't suffered enough.

How should we as Christians understand suffering? Those are our questions for this morning. No one likes to suffer. We don't like to think or talk about it. We would rather avoid it and change the channel. But the truth is, it is something with which we all must grapple. It is also one of the

essential questions of faith. Every religion, every philosophical system, every ideology tries to explain human suffering and respond to the question: does it have meaning?

When the Apostle Peter was writing his first letter, this was one of the questions with which he struggled. It was not the suffering caused by bad weather and other disasters. It was the suffering that Christians experienced because they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, not unlike the 21 men in Egypt. In those early days, many Christians were tortured and martyred for their beliefs. Peter was referring to this inflicted suffering when he told them how to respond to the torture and the suffering that they would incur. Peter's thesis was that suffering was meaningful if one suffered for the right reason, (the truth). Suffering for the sake of Christ placed the individual within the intimate community of Christ's suffering.

This morning, on the first Sunday in the season of Lent, I want to look at the reality of human suffering. It is not one of those uplifting topics make us feel good, but by the same token, it is a reality in all of our lives. I believe that suffering not only contains the possibility of meaning, it can be redemptive. In short, human suffering has the potential to be the portal by which the grace of God enters our lives.

There are different types of suffering that you and I experience, but there are two types I would like to consider this morning. These are the types that often make a frontal assault upon our faith and lead us to ask if there is in any meaning or purpose at all. 1. The suffering from illness, accident or disaster. 2. The suffering inflicted by other human beings. There are two dimensions of our contemporary experience of suffering. There is the physical dimension... and there is also the spiritual or inner dimension. It is the latter that seeks to answer the question of meaning. It is the spirit, or the inner person who struggles to find purpose. Let us briefly consider these.

The suffering caused by illness and accident: “Why did this happen to me?” “Why have I been diagnosed with this illness?” “Why was my car there, when the other person ran the red light?”

These are the questions the soul asks. They are questions about meaning and purpose.

Philosophers from Leibniz to Sartre have asked these questions. There are two responses that faith offers: First, this type of suffering serves to remind us that we are finite. We are creatures, made by God and given life by God. Ultimately we are not our own, and there are host of circumstances we do not control. We can only respond. We have no control over the tree that falls on our car, but we do have control over our emotions and how we respond to that event. More often than not we have no control over the accident or illness that comes upon us... but we do have some measure of control over how we respond.

The second response of faith is that suffering enables our faith to grow and mature. It is an opportunity for faithfulness, renewal of the soul and even discipleship. When I was a child, one of my favorite relatives was my uncle Neal. He was my father’s youngest brother. He was fun loving, filled with joy, always smiling, and always fun to be around. He developed a terminal cancer in his thirties. It was unfair... and seemingly meaningless. Yet he spent his last days on earth, walking the floor of the cancer ward at Temple University Hospital, praying with other cancer patients, and even singing hymns. He found a sense of purpose in his suffering.

My brother-in-law, Robert, (Karen’s brother) whom I dearly loved, also was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He used the last months of his life, not only preparing family and loved ones for his death... but in his own unique way, witnessing to what was important in life.. preparing us to live. The incredible gifts that these two men shared with others during their last days brought incredible purpose and meaning to their suffering. Their suffering was redemptive. It made them whole, in

spite of their illness. It enabled them to touch others and enrich their lives. Their illness was an opportunity to glorify God and help others. In short, their suffering was the portal by which the grace of God touched my life and the lives of others.

One of the influences in my life is the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Though never baptized and not known for his great piety, he was able to articulate a theological vision for the nation that has not been equaled by any statesperson since. Lincoln's presidency was during the greatest division in our nation's history. The country was pulled apart and was suffering from a bloody civil war. Lincoln, we are told, could be seen riding through Washington D.C. during the evening, trying to come to grips with what was happening. His own marriage was difficult and he buried a beloved child. He was a man who knew personal pain and suffering and many historians have conjectured that he was probably depressed.

But his depression and suffering enabled him to articulate a vision of wholeness, forgiveness and hope for a nation that was literally broken in half. His second inaugural address might be the greatest political oratory in our history, because to a broken nation it spoke of healing and unity. Lincoln's personal suffering and trials were the portal of grace and healing for this nation.

II

The suffering experienced at the hands of others: During this past week, many of us have struggled with the horrific news that continues from the Middle East. Last week we were horrified to hear that 21 Christians were brutally murdered, martyred, simply because they were Christians. We also learned of Kayla Mueller's death. Kayla was a young woman of 26 years of age. She was in the middle east to bring aid and comfort to refugees. A positive young person held captive by ISIS. She taught her guards how to do crafts and make peace birds out of paper. She stood on her head for

exercise in her cramped quarters. And she wrote uplifting letters home despite being a prisoner of this brutal terrorist regime.

How can such brutal and senseless suffering proffer any goodness or grace? Let me share with you the story of Dehqani-Tafti, the Anglican Bishop of Iran. In the 1970's during the Islamic revolution, the Anglican Church was forced to leave and Bishop Tafti fled to Cyprus. His son, Bahram, stayed in Iran with the people there. He was a teacher, and felt that he needed to continue to be with his people in the midst of their oppression. In 1979, he was dragged from his car and murdered by radicals in the street.

The Bishop wished to attend his son's funeral, but it was impossible, and so he sent a prayer. I offer it to you now, because it is, one of the most remarkable statements of faith, forgiveness and the grace of God, that I have ever encountered.

"O God, we remember not only our son but his murderers,

Not because they killed him in the prime of his youth and made our hearts bleed and our tears flow,

Not because with this savage act they have brought further disgrace on the name of our country among the civilized nations of the world:

But because through their crime we now follow more closely thy footsteps in the way of sacrifice.

The terrible fire of this calamity burns up all selfishness and possessiveness in us:

Its flame reveals the depth of depravity, meanness and suspicion, the dimension of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature.

It makes plain to us as never before our need to trust in thy love as shown in the Cross of Jesus and his Resurrection,

Love that makes us free from all hatred towards our persecutors:

Love which brings patience, forbearance, courage, loyalty, humility, generosity and greatness of heart, Love which more than ever deepens our trust in God's final victory and thy eternal designs for the Church and for the world:

Love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face our own day of death.

O God, our son's blood multiplies the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls: so when his murderers stand before thee on the Day of Judgment remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives, and forgive." (from *Oxford Book of Prayer*, pp. 135, 136)

Every time I read that prayer, I shake, wondering if I have the faith, the love, to say those words were I in his shoes. I cannot imagine the suffering and pain of this man, and yet am moved beyond words. His suffering, the suffering of his son, indeed his family became a portal of grace that has touched my life with the message of Christ's love.

I am on the verge of entering my 7th decade of life. I remember showing my paintings to my friend and getting his response, but I suspect that the years have not improved my talent for the brush and canvas. But I do know this, and can say it with some conviction: The suffering and pain of life, contain within the possibility of meaning. That God does not abandon us in the midst of those moments... rather God is often there, purposefully, wonderfully... molding, reshaping, and renewing. The wounds of suffering are often the portals through which the grace of God is poured.

I have learned from members of my congregations, and from loved ones, that even times of illness and pain, can be moments that are filled with love, hope and ministry. I have learned, and I pray that you will also, that though we may suffer at times... there is nothing.. nothing in heaven and on earth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. This is the Good news. Amen.