

The Church's Response To Suffering: *Your faith has made you well*

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-12; 2nd Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

This week I have been especially tired, especially bogged down with problems that I seem to have absolutely no control over. I've been reading the news too often and God's word too little, and let me tell you...I am so tired. Another man shot, another man killed—blatant, horrific misogyny on a national stage—devastating hurricanes in our most vulnerable parts of the world—attacks in Yemen, attacks in Syria. And I just don't know what to do with it all, because I know when I wake up tomorrow and read the news again, there will be more. Because I know there are countless more stories that will never get coverage, because it's not deemed "important enough" by the media. It haunts me. But then, I read this week's lessons, and I start thinking about suffering and what it all means, and maybe that it doesn't mean anything at all. Maybe it's for no reason; maybe it is and I'm just not catching it—but it sure seems to me that if God cared at least a little bit He would put a stop to it all instead of leaving us all to fend for ourselves. Because if we're being honest here, we are doing a pretty terrible job. And I don't even know if I'm allowed to say that at the pulpit but I have never been to seminary, so I think I can maybe get away with a little extra. And then I decide that I don't have all the answers at all anyway, but that I want Jesus. And so here I am, stuck in the tension between what is and what should be, and wondering exactly where God is in those two extremes.

Then He shows up, saying, *Your faith has made you well.*

These are the words Jesus has for the one leper who returns in thanksgiving. It is no mistake that the one who returns is doubly marginalized. Not only a leper, the man is also a "foreigner," a Samaritan. As such, he cannot enter the Jerusalem temple to worship God, but here he is worshipping Jesus without shame or hesitation...that's a whole other message itself, I think. And why does he come back? To give thanksgiving for the work God has done. And Jesus accepts his thanksgiving as faithfulness. Jesus heals this man of his imminent, physical need first, but when the man returns with thanksgiving, an outpouring of faith, Jesus says, *Get up. Your faith has made you well.* But Jesus is no longer talking about his leprosy. He's referring to the man's very soul, to his salvation.

When we look at Jesus' response to suffering in this passage, it can better inform our own as a church. Jesus heals all ten, caring for their physical needs. One returns and experiences the deeper meaning of faith and healing. Likewise, the church is to tend to the needy...which I think represents all of us, at one point or another. This is our mission to the world, in the hopes that the one who comes back with thanksgiving will enter into Christ's larger story. While wider Western culture says to escape the suffering of the world and seek happiness at whatever cost to oneself or others, Jesus invites suffering in, and the healing that comes in the mundane acts of everyday faithfulness. Just as Jesus invites us to the Table, He invites us to take up our cross daily. He invites us to enter into the pain of our brother and sister. Just like Jesus, we are called to join into the suffering of others.

In our lesson from Jeremiah, God's people have been exiled to Babylon. They miss their homeland, their way of life, their day-to-day. Jeremiah's response is, "Lean in." Settle down,

build homes and marry, and *seek the welfare of the city* where you have been exiled, *for in its welfare you will find your welfare*. Jeremiah offers a shockingly realistic response to the suffering of His people. Be faithful, he is saying. This is a picture of the Kingdom. We are living in a world that does not often appear to be Christ's, and yet, we settle down and build homes. We seek the welfare of this city, and in doing so, we find this city, this world, becoming Christ's.

We are facing a world that is hurting so deeply; we are hurting deeply, at an individual and a communal level. We have big enemies: racism, gender discrimination, environmental injustice. Let not our response be escapist. Too often, all we have to offer a hurting world is, "Everything happens for a reason," and meaningless murmurs of, "I'll pray for you," while we avoid eye contact and hurry on with our day. But...everything may happen for a reason, but the reason is not always God's. The temptation is to ignore or avoid topics and situations that involve pain—to us or to others. God's plan for the world is so much more beautiful than we could ever imagine, and we have to acknowledge that our current reality is a distorted view of God's plan. We've got to lean in. To acknowledge the pain and be faithful anyway, give thanks anyway, to be both Christ, and the leper. The most comforting thing I have to offer when I have no words is that God is mourning what we are mourning too—that Christ is crying as we cry. That God is not some distant supreme being Who is wholly separated from our hardships, but that He is uniquely present in the midst of that pain, coming alongside, mourning alongside, and asking for our faith. And sometimes we carry that torch forward for those who do not have the strength or the hope left to do so themselves, in hopes that our faith will be a soothing balm in their own journey. We are literally bringing the Kingdom. This is the Church.

We must wrestle with the realities of day-to-day life, with cancer and mental illness, with war and poverty, with racial and gender injustice. When people come to the Church and the world with suffering, we must invite them in, stop and pray with them now, listen to them now, struggle alongside them now, do the hard work of healing now. To do any less is offensive to the struggles people face every day. We must not only acknowledge the suffering of others and of ourselves, but enter into the hurt as a faithful response, trusting in God's healing. We must acknowledge that the body was broken before the body healed. The Church preaches joy in Jesus, but we forget that joy often flows from sorrow. And so, Christ offers an entirely different paradigm to responding to suffering. Instead of seeking to avoid it, Christ invites us into the story. We have to first sit in the grave before we reach the resurrection. Always, always, we are looking toward His hope in the renewing of all things—the reconciliation of God to His creation. But we have to know that renewing is often painful, and maybe at times unfair in our limited understanding.

Our own theology of healing echoes, "Some will not be healed in this life; all can be saved." The Church has so much more to offer than idle condolences. We have a larger narrative that is told every time we break bread together.

Three years ago, I sat alone in the third row at a chapel service in Whitlock. And boy, was I angry, as I sat through the worship and questioned and wondered what had made my heart so cold. I longed to feel God's presence but I was becoming more and more convinced that He was never really there. That chapel service happened to be a Communion service. I sat near the front and watched Every...Single...Person...file through that line to receive, "The body and blood of

Christ, broken and shed for you... for you...for you...for you...for you...for me." I began to weep as something in me clicked. Broken and shed for you. Christ suffered for our ultimate gain, for our healing—our holistic healing. And whatever suffering in my life or yours today is worth something, and real, and painful. And Christ is there. He's in the thick of it...for you...and you...and you—broken for you. This is what we have to offer the world.

When a person, when our black brothers and sisters, come forward with something, come forward saying, "We are suffering in this country and our lives seem not to matter; we will no longer be silent," the Church cannot retain silence either. When refugees come to us saying, "We have no home, we have nowhere to go," we cannot turn them away. When families of and people with mental or physical illness say, "My story does not seem to matter and I am constantly being told to just try harder to be well," we cannot respond with dismissal. As Jesus does, we must embrace the foreigner, or the one who has been cast out, and begin the long and often painful process toward healing. We must enfold them in this larger narrative we have, to offer hope and healing to the world. We have the hope of resurrection and the everyday acts of faithfulness to give. So we must give freely and abundantly. We break bread. We pray continually, "I believe, I believe. Help my unbelief."

We pray every single Sunday—every single Sunday—for healing with those with cancer—every single Sunday. This is faithfulness.

We give thanks for His healing, and we continue to pray for where it still hurts. We mourn and we rejoice in the promise of the Kingdom. We do the tireless work of reconciliation. This is our gift, Christ's gift, to a hurting world, to one another. These everyday mercies of God are what heals the soul. These everyday mercies are Christ living among us, Christ whispering, *Your faith has made you well.*