

## Not Far – Niqui Reinhard

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

I gazed over the rusty hospital bed frame to the frail body nestled beneath the snow-white sheets and a shiver ran up my spine. Seeing the IV protruding from his dark fair skin, and seeing his sad smile made me feel as though a hand had reached inside my back and squeezed my muscles up into a knot. I could hardly muster enough inner strength to utter the few words of encouragement contained in my limited Spanish vocabulary. A feeble smile was the best I had to offer.

We don't do well with suffering. Especially when it is suffering of the innocent and righteous. Don't worry, I am not bold enough to stand up here and make a flimsy effort to solve the problem of evil, but I do want to explore suffering in our lives a bit. As I read about suffering in our passage from 1st Peter, I wonder how often I have actually seen suffering modeled well, and whether or not I have done any Christ-like suffering. The truth is I've done relatively little suffering in my life at all. I'm sure some here have either seen or have themselves suffered selflessly, but generally speaking we aren't very good sufferers.

Frani, the boy I visited in the hospital, knows how to live joyfully and hopefully, even with undeserved suffering. Even with the IV sticking out of his arm, he looked up and smiled at me as I walked into his hospital room. Before the surgery, you never would have known that anything was wrong with this carefree cheerful little boy. Even though his digestion complications left him needing to be mindful of a pouch hanging outside his stomach, he ran and jumped and laughed and played baseball with the rest of the kids in the community, without complaining, leaving the onlooker totally unaware of his condition.

What if we lived like Frani more often? What if we learned how to continue to be a blessing to people, even in the midst of our suffering? What if we lived in honest community with one another where we didn't feel like we were suffering alone? In John, as Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit, he is speaking to them not as individuals, but as a community of faith. Maybe relearning this communal aspect of our faith will aid us in learning how to suffer. We are not alone.

But we know all about community, at least some surface level kind of knowledge, and yet some days we still feel so alone. Sure, it is a community made of imperfect broken people, and some days they may not pick us up right away when we fall, but we will always have God right? As Paul announces to the Athenians, "From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though

indeed he is not far from each one of us.” Is that true God? Are you sure you are indeed not far from me? Sometimes I wonder. Doesn’t it sometimes seem that “not far” is an extremely inadequate description of the distance between God and us?

Frani knew he wasn’t alone. He was surrounded by a community that may not have always had the monetary and physical resources to help him, but constantly loved and supported him. When Kati, my Dominican mom, and neighbor to Frani, found out about the cost of his surgery, she walked the surrounding communities to gather a love offering to help his family with the seemingly unbearable financial burden. The way this community trusted God to provide when they started out with so little was absolutely incredible and inspiring.

I love how Pastor Ben reminded us several weeks ago about being an Easter people. Now six weeks after Easter, well on our way to Pentecost, how are we still living in the light of the cross? It’s evident on Easter, but what are the manifestations of the cross for St. Paul’s six weeks after Easter? One way of being an Easter people is providing a safe place for suffering or grieving souls, just as the community surrounding Frani did.

I don’t know the extent to which Frani understood what was happening with his situation, but regardless he seemed hopeful the entire time. He may not have fully grasped the timeline of the end of his suffering from this physical ailment with the coming surgery, but in spite of the suffering he continued living fully.

I have to confess. In this last week leading up to this Sunday, it was tempting to hand my sermon over to a veteran like my grandpa or Dr. Rick or Dr. Matt, because as I was processing these passages, I came up with about eight forty-second sermons, but couldn’t quite get to one that tied them all together. So how can we tie this all together? We see suffering, and wonder how it could ever turn into hope, and wonder how to hold onto hope in spite of suffering.

I find hope in justice. We hear that word thrown around quite a bit in our culture, perhaps sometimes in vain, but a justice which instigates pockets of the kingdom of God forming and molding together is not out of reach. What does this justice look like? One aspect of justice is appropriate consequences for behavior. The negative consequences are the ones we may not want to face as people who sometimes act unjustly, but we look forward to the positive consequences of justice being served and relief for the oppressed. The rushing mighty wind of Pentecost, which soon approaches, evokes another image of justice reminiscent of the Bob Dylan song from 1962:

How many years must a mountain exist,  
before it is washed to the sea  
How many years can some people exist,  
before they’re allowed to be free  
How many times can a man turn his head,

and pretend that he just doesn't see

The answer, my friend, is blowin in the wind

The answer is blowin in the wind

Where does this justice come from? It comes from people in authority, ultimately the One in the highest place of authority. It comes with the presence of Jesus on earth, and with men and women recognizing Jesus in those around them and therefore not exploiting those around them. Shane Claiborne speaks movingly of his experience working with Mother Teresa and the lepers of Calcutta in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*. As you could imagine, the underwhelming amount of resources paled in comparison to the magnitude of the disease. Therefore rather than prolonging life the mission of those in the community became to help people die well, with dignity and with someone loving them. And Shane voices that "over and over, the dying and the lepers would whisper the mystical word namaste in my ear." Namaste. "I honor the Holy One who lives in you." I love that greeting and I wish that we were more consistently aware of the Holy One who lives in those around us.

How does this justice come about? Empowerment. Empowering those in authority to use that authority to level the playing fields. Empowering those held down by corrupt systems to step out from under them. Those living in that community in Calcutta took part in a kind of empowerment in which we all can participate, regardless of income or political influence. They loved and touched the "untouchables" and actually looked into the eyes of men and women around them, and saw Jesus.

When does this justice come about? Hopefully tomorrow, but in actuality, it will just happen gradually as long as people continue to be aware of the desperate need for it. It is one of the many elements of the Kingdom that is both now and not yet.

We have a God who is indeed not far from each one of us, and we have a hope that His justice is also not far off. And as Paul tells the Romans, we have a hope that "does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." And in His not-far-off-ness we can have hope in the midst of our suffering.