

## “Why Have You Forsaken Me?” – Kent Dunnington

Job 23:1-9, 16-17   Psalm 22:1-15   Hebrews 4:12-16   Mark 10:17-31

Have you ever felt the distance that suffering brings, the chasm between the worlds of those who suffer and those for whom all is well? W.H. Auden’s poem “Surgical Ward” gives voice to the distance between these two worlds. Describing hospital patients in their beds, Auden writes,

They are and suffer; that is all they do;  
A bandage hides the place where each is living,  
His knowledge of the world restricted to  
The treatment that the instruments are giving.  
And lie apart like epochs from each other  
—Truth in their sense is how much they can bear;  
It is not talk like ours, but groans they smother—  
And are remote as plants; we stand elsewhere.  
For who when healthy can become a foot?  
Even a scratch we can’t recall when cured,  
But are boist’rous in a moment and believe  
In the common world of the uninjured, and cannot  
Imagine isolation. Only happiness is shared...

“For who when healthy can become a foot?” Auden asks. When you are healthy and happy, no amount of care, concern, or well-meaning sympathy can give you access to the world of smothered groans. You may offer words of comfort, a gentle smile, saying, “you’re in my prayers.” But five minutes later? two minutes later? thirty seconds later? you are making dinner plans with friends, you are planning your evening outfit, you are daydreaming about the guy you like. Thus, for Auden, there can be no genuine “com-passion,” no real “suffering-with,” across these worlds. These worlds “lie apart like epochs from each other.”

And when you are unwell, when you are sick or bereaved or despairing, no amount of positive thinking or tough-mindedness can transport you into the world of the happy, the boist’rous, the healthy. All experience is reduced to the foot that has been amputated, the son or daughter that has been lost, the husband or wife that has left, the chronic illness that has attacked. And the world of the uninjured is an affront—they laugh and they flirt and they plan for the future—as though all is well with the world. Truly these two worlds, of the suffering and the well, “lie apart like epochs from each other.”

All of our Old Testament readings for today come from the world of suffering. The Psalmist cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” Job, in anger and despair, wishes he would die: “God has made my heart

faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!”

What is true of the surgical ward is true of these texts as well. Only the suffering can really hear them. For those in the world of the happy and the boisterous, these are words on a page, evoking perhaps faint reminders of past struggles, but nothing more. A little food for thought, then it's time for a hearty lunch with friends or family, and finally some Sunday afternoon FOOTBALL. Yay! And this is simply the way things are—to be human is to occupy only one of these worlds at a time. And praise be to God if there are many among us in the world of the uninjured, the happy and the boisterous. Praise be to God if there are many among us who are not leveled by these texts. Right?

I know I want to say “right.” Believe me, I do not want to suffer, now or ever. I do not want any of you to suffer, now or ever. I hate suffering more than anything in the world. But will God validate our indignation against suffering? Will Jesus confirm our deepest hopes that God will save us from our pain? God, I wish he would, and God how it terrifies me that he doesn't.

Our gospel reading for today tells the story of a man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Do not think of him as a rich younger ruler. He is just like you and me; he had many possessions. Follow the commandments, replies Jesus. Anything else? asks the man. “You lack one thing,” Jesus replies. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” And when the man heard this, he was shocked and, disappointed, he chose not to follow this man Jesus.

We have misread this passage as a passage about wealth and riches, and therefore as a passage about the virtues of charity and stewardship. The passage is about none of those things. The passage is about suffering, I am convinced, because our attachment to money has everything to do with our fear of suffering.

I have spoken of the two worlds which Auden evokes: the world of suffering, sadness, sickness and death on the one hand; and the world of happiness, laughter, health, and life on the other. Now ask yourself: what is it that allows me to remain as much as is humanly possible in the world of life and to avoid the world of death? I think you will discover that money, more than anything else, provides some hope of insurance against the world of pain, suffering, deprivation and death. Money buys us homes that keep us warm, safe, and dry. Money rescues us from the slums, which terrify us with images of decay, destitution, danger, and death. Money buys us medical care that keeps us healthy, strong, and mobile. Money rescues us from the sick-beds where people rot and wither and expire. Money buys us nice clothes and plastic surgery to disguise our deteriorating bodies; it buys us televisions and drugs and pornography to distract us from the boredom and despair that threaten to reveal the weakness of our lives. Money provides access to the right neighborhood, with the best schools, so that our children may be happy and successful and avoid the streets and the prisons where failure and disappointment

reign. And money will secure our retirement—secure it against what?—against the ever-encroaching vulnerability and debility of old-age.

To believe in the gospel of life, of security and safety, of health and strength, of success and achievement, of romance and attractiveness—what we most need to sustain this belief is money. Of course, it is a losing battle. Signs of death, of danger, of sickness, of failure, of loneliness accost us on all sides. But make no mistake that our chief instrument for warding off these attacks is money.

But Jesus says to this man—this man who is very much like you and like me—who wants merely to care for himself and his family, to have enough in the bank for a time of crisis, to pay the medical bills and put the kids in good schools and keep up the general appearance of success and contentment. Jesus says to this man, give it all away and follow me.

This man was shocked and disappointed. And I am shocked and disappointed as well. What can I say? I cannot understand this Jesus, nor do I wish to follow him. Yet this Jesus is God, and in his cross of suffering and death we find our only salvation. How can this be? How can it be “explained?”

Perhaps it should be not explained. For most attempts to explain the cross—usually with some kind of a “theory of atonement”—make the cross the opposite of what it is, by somehow allowing us to avoid the inevitability of our own suffering, deterioration, and death. This is why theologians call the atonement a mystery. It is not a mystery because it is a puzzle that simply cannot be solved, but rather because to come to know the truth that in the cross of Christ we are saved is to come to know that everything else we think we know is undone by this knowledge that we are redeemed by a suffering Savior (Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ*).

I am reticent to say more. To say more might suggest that if we could just understand the cross of Jesus our suffering would cease to be suffering, that the cross of Jesus could become yet another strategy for us to evade our fleshly suffering and death. Yet we will not evade suffering and death. The Christian is one who simply endures, perseveres, goes on, in the knowledge that, as the author of Hebrews says, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are.” Jesus is in the world of suffering, of pain, of deprivation, and of death. The cry of the Psalmist was his cry on the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But what about the resurrection? Surely we should not focus on the cross and death of Jesus when the story ends with his resurrection! Yes, but Jesus did not avoid or defeat death by believing in a doctrine of resurrection. Jesus defeated death by enduring it, willingly entering into death and discovering its limits (McGill, *Death and Life*). Resurrection is not Jesus’ escape-clause from death. We should like to think of it that way because, once again, it would make our own suffering and death accidental to what is most real. But that is not what resurrection is. Rather, resurrection is the revelation that the God made known to us in Jesus

Christ is not defeated by death because the life of the Trinity is constituted by complete self-donation. And if God's reality is constituted by self-donation, then God's reality is not destroyed but rather expressed in his self-giving suffering and death for us.

I want to avoid any more theological abstraction. So let me end by focusing on this bread and this cup that await us. Every Sunday, we eat Jesus, as Pastor Rick so often reminds us. We need to think of this quite literally to begin to get a glimpse of how God saves us in the cross of Christ. In eating Jesus, we kill Jesus, for who can be eaten alive without being killed? Jesus' sacrificial death nourishes us—again quite literally—every Sunday. God feeds us with his own flesh and blood. Jesus dies so that we may be nourished. And yet the death of Jesus does not extinguish his reality because his reality is not constituted by self-possession, self-protection, and self-preservation but rather by self-donation and self-sacrifice. That is, by refusing to live as if the only way to be real is to secure and possess a self that can ward off suffering and death, Jesus reveals that there is another way to be real.

We are saved by following Jesus into this Eucharistic death. In our sufferings, we get a foretaste of the death that is surely to come. We pray for the strength to endure, hoping in faith that in giving ourselves away through suffering, self-expenditure and death we may find that there is a new kind of life called resurrection.

Amen.