**A Passion for Healing**

A sermon for Passion Sunday, April 7, 2019

By the Rev. Christopher WEndell

St. Pauls’ Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

I’ve only been to the Holy Lands once, nearly 15 years ago now. I was a 23 year old seminarian and basically snuck on to a trip for college students that our former bishop, Tom Shaw was leading. I think I was supposed to be keeping an eye on the undergrads, as I was only maybe five years older than them at that point. We had been touring Biblical sites throughout Israel and Palestine and talking about theology and faith, but also immersing ourselves deeply in the nuances of the conflicts between those two countries: struggling for so long and so painfully in figuring out how to share land, share resources, share history, and share a sense of dignity. It was enough to make your head and your heart both spin at the same time.

So, near the end of the trip, we took a retreat day on the Sea of Galilee. Bishop Tom offered to have a spiritual direction appointment with me. And as we sat there, looking out at the lake, the Bishop and I, there was silence between us. When he spoke, I was expecting him to ask me something about how I had come to know God more, or see the Bible differently now that I’d been here, or maybe even what I thought about the politics of the region. Instead, he asked me a very simple question: How do you suffer? Again, there was silence between us. For an instant I felt as though I was about to burst into tears. No one had ever asked me that question before. How do you suffer?

We call today Passion Sunday. But the word passion means suffering. So, we might call it Suffering Sunday…except that if we did that, perhaps no one would come. Stories of suffering are not easy to hear, nor to share. In some indirect way, the Passion Gospel asks the question of each of us “How do you suffer?” As liberating as it can be to be asked that question, it’s not exactly one we always choose to sit with (especially with other people). It’s such a tender question, one needing spaciousness and generosity of spirit in the response, that it isn’t one we just bandy about. But today, the day we hear the story of Jesus’ passion, suffering is on the table. Your suffering. My suffering. Jesus’ suffering. It’s all on the table. Actually it is all on the table: God’s table. The table where what is broken is also blessed and shared.

Also, on the table, is the suffering of others: suffering we might normally not see, or perhaps, in our worse moments, even choose to ignore. And particularly in our minds should be the suffering of those for whom the story of Jesus’ passion has not been a fountain of healing and an assurance of blessing -- but rather a source of persecution. Maybe it is unsurprising, but it is certainly to be repented of, that Christians have used the account of Jesus’ persecution, trial, arrest and crucifixion to persecute others; to justify religious scapegoating, anti-Jewish sentiment, and even a stance of Christian superiority and exclusivism. Through history, Christians have been quick to use the account of Jesus’ own suffering to cause suffering for others, while claiming blessing for ourselves. Nothing could be further from the mind and heart of Christ, or further from his Passion.

Because the Passion Gospel puts something else on the table, too. Not suffering only, but also healing. The great question of all suffering is not why it exists. It is whether suffering will lead to more suffering, or whether suffering will lead to healing. Both outcomes are possible: and like so many of the great narratives human literature (the Greek Dramas, Shakespeare, countless indigenous stories and folk tales) the drama hinges not on the fact of suffering, but on how human beings will respond. When it comes the Passion Gospel, God’s answer to that question could not be clearer. Even Jesus’ own suffering became an occasion for many accounts of healing.

This is especially noticeable in Luke’s account, which we hear this year. Luke’s Gospel as a whole highlights Jesus’ vocation as a healer. In this Passion we see Jesus depicted as a source of many kinds of healing: bodily healing, relational healing, social healing, soul healing. Early in the narrative, we see Jesus physically healing the ear of the slave whom one of the disciples strikes with a sword. During the course of Jesus’ trial, Luke take pains to note that it is through Jesus’ passion that some kind of broken relationship between Herod and Pilate is healed. Luke doesn’t say what caused friction between them, only that the experience of encountering the suffering Jesus reconciles them to each other. From the Cross, Luke’s Jesus offers blanket immunity to all who have engaged in his persecution: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Christianity’s history at various times and places of considering Jews guilty of the murder of Jesus so clearly betrays Jesus’ dying wish that his suffering lead to healing rather than more suffering. And finally, even as his own breath begins to fail him, Jesus cannot help but offer healing to the criminal being crucified next to him. This criminal, later come to be known as St. Dismas, faces his suffering with honesty, humility, and the hope of eternal life with the Father -- and Jesus promises him healing for his immortal soul, while he himself is dying. Jesus cannot prevent his own suffering, cannot reject the cup before him. But he can ensure that his suffering brings healing to others around him, rather than more harm.

And his commitment to letting his suffering become a source of healing for others is infectious. Other, seemingly minor characters in the drama, begin to emulate Jesus’ pattern of letting their own suffering become a source of healing for others. Consider Simon of Cyrene. We know almost nothing about him. He was a true passer-by who saw Jesus’ suffering under the burden of his Cross. And when the soldier compelled him to assist, took on Christ’s burden. Even in his own suffering, Simon became an agent of healing to Jesus’ body. Similarly, Joseph of Arimathea. He suffered greatly by being the lone voice of dissent in the council of elders called the Sanhedran that voted to send Jesus to Pilate. The isolation, loneliness, alienation from his own peers, and perhaps even threat of physical safety all caused him suffering. But his suffering became a source of healing for Jesus. Even though Joseph could not prevent Jesus’ death, he could care for Jesus’ soul, by removing, washing, and wrapping his mortal remains, and laying them in a tomb so his spirit could be at rest. His own suffering was a source of healing for others.

This idea that our suffering might be a source of healing for others, may feel a little uncomfortable at first. I can understand that. Christianity has been known to glorify suffering in ways that have caused more harm. Christianity has taught at times that God somehow *desired* for Jesus to undergo the passion. Nothing that I know about God convinces me that this is either true or necessary to our faith. God didn’t need suffering for Jesus to be an agent of healing and redemption. Jesus was an agent of healing and redemption for three years before his Passion. What God did need, was for Jesus to continue his vocation as a healer and a redeemer and a reconciler, whatever may have befallen him. God needed Jesus to persist in the way of Love, whether through joy or suffering, so that he would empower those of us who follow him to do likewise.

As we turn towards Holy Week, the Passion reminds us that our vocation as friends of Jesus is not to avoid all suffering in life. It is not even to end all suffering for others. It is to put our stake in the ground and say that however we may suffer, however those around us may be suffering, our response will not further the suffering of anyone. We will not be indifferent. We will not be retaliatory. We will not perpetuate cycles of violence. Like Simon and Joseph and others, our vocation is to be healers, whenever and wherever we find ourselves.

Before they became characters in Jesus’ Passion, these folks were just people. People like you and me. People with families, people with feelings, with competing priorities, divided loyalties, everyday challenges, gifts, prejudices, distracted minds, and imperfect values. They were human beings who had a chance to turn suffering into healing for others. So do you. So do I. So do we all. Amen.