

Proper 17 A: True Religion

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

The Reverend Paul D. Allick, The Church of the Advent, August 30, 2020

When he was 68 my dad had a massive stroke. He was completely paralyzed on the left side of his body. We had to move him into a nursing home. He wore a diaper and ate puréed food. He endured several medical procedures. He was experiencing some dementia.

This went on for 10 months before he passed away. My brother, sisters and I took turns staying with him. We all lived 6-11 hours away.

One day while I was sitting with him, I said, “Dad, I am sorry you are suffering so much.” He got quiet and then answered, “We’re all suffering. You kids are suffering seeing me this way.”

That evening at prayer I was thinking about his comment. Suddenly in my mind appeared St. John, the Blessed Mother and the other women at the foot of the Cross. I realized for the first time how much they suffered. I knew Jesus suffered but I had never meditated on his mother and friends who stood by him through that whole ordeal.

Compassion means to “suffer with.” It’s more than pity. Compassion means to walk with someone who is suffering. Their anguish causes us to suffer.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to face arrest, torture and execution. He is telling his disciples about the terrible things that will happen to him before he rises on the third day.

He must have been full of dread. His mind must have been racing and his stomach turning. He doesn't need some mild words of encouragement. He doesn't need someone to rationalize and minimize the situation. He doesn't need his friends' denial. He needs their compassion. He needs them to suffer with him.

Right before this scene, Peter had identified Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus is elaborating on what that means. Peter won't hear of it. Peter goes from being the rock of faith to being a stumbling block to the mission. Peter does not understand the depth of what Jesus must face in order to fulfill his mission.

Peter doesn't want to see Jesus arrested and executed. It would be too difficult to watch. Further it would be embarrassing for those who have identified Jesus as the Messiah.

This is the paradox of the Christian faith: to live you must die; to thrive you must know how to suffer well. Christ calls to us, "If any want to be my disciples you must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life you must first lose yourself."

Through the power of his Cross Jesus suffers with us. He seeks our compassion. He calls us to have compassion for others. We Christians wrestle with our suffering instead of running from it is so that we can develop compassion.

I learned so much about myself, about God, and about my family as we spent those ten months suffering with dad. In that experience I began to understand faith. We had nowhere to turn but to God and there we found God suffering with us.

In that time God nourished us with goodness as we passed through all of that tension and grief. In the face of the suffering we bore good fruit. In the end my siblings and I became closer than we had ever been before. And we had a profound and healthy good-bye with our dad.

I am not telling a glamorized fairytale here. Believe me there have been plenty of times when suffering in my life and with my family has felt hopeless, endless and without meaning. I am sharing a time when that wasn't the case; when the suffering meant something; a time when suffering became compassion as we leaned into it rather than running from it.

To remember that journey of suffering helps me to face it whenever it comes along again.

I can see some of the lessons I learned in St. Paul's advice to the congregation in Rome, "Let love be genuine." Outdo one another in showing honor to each other. Show hospitality to the stranger. Persevere in prayer. Do not be haughty. Do not get lost in holding grudges. If your enemy is hungry give her something to eat. If she is thirsty give her something to drink. Love your enemies. It will drive them nutty and keep you at peace.

We are not overcome by evil. We overcome evil with good. We are not overcome by suffering. We overcome suffering with compassion.

In these trying days, we as disciples of Jesus Christ have picked up our crosses. We are learning how to suffer with Jesus and with each other. We confess Jesus as the Messiah and walk with him to the Cross. And as we suffer well, we see how to rise from the dead. We rise with Jesus here and now and onto eternity. Always we rise.