

St. Luke's UMC
May 23, 2021
Pentecost

Everyday Hope
The Hope of Suffering
1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

I have an interesting doctor appointment in the morning. It is with an Executive Health Physician to hear the results of my physical several weeks ago. This Executive Physical was the gift of some gracious members who did this themselves and felt it so helpful they insisted Susan and I do it. The experience is a little more involved than normal physicals. For a week we had to give up eating red meat. It also meant taking samples of things that strips away all dignity. The days leading up to the physical we couldn't take any medicines not prescribed, so no Ibuprofen or Acetaminophen, and, of course, no coffee the morning of the exam which may have been the most difficult part.

Before seeing the doctor several vials of blood are taken. You do a stress test which leaves you sweating. They also put you in an enclosed machine called a *Bod Pod* which checks your body fat. I don't know that I'm looking forward to hearing those results. And, of course, they measure your weight and height. It had been a long time since my height was measured, much less barefooted. I realized I have shrunk an inch and a half since high school, but there you go. I guess ministry is wearing me down!

But then the doctor comes in. Now, he did a physical exam. He checked all the things a doctor usually does, but not until after roughly an hour of conversation. That was different. He wanted to know where I was from. What my parents did for a living. Their health. The health of my siblings. The kind of foods I ate growing up. My diet now. What I do for a living. How I spend my days. My own health record. Every little ache or pain I have.

I share all of this to say that this thorough investigative analysis left me with an impression connecting a person's health or unhealth to the sources of one's condition. I go to thinking how we live in a time of amazing human capacity to create medicines and drugs that treat symptoms of problems or relieve the pain caused by such problems, but not necessarily get at the source of those problems.

One evening watching the 30 minute national news, I counted as many as ten different drug advertisements meant to relieve pain or symptoms. Of course each comes with a list of warnings about all the side effects such drugs can cause that make you wonder if the cure might not be worse than the disease. But we have become such a pain averse society, that I wonder if we the lessons pain can provide.

Listen to the words of James Davies, who was part of the panel that wrote the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The DSM, as its popularly called is like the Bible of psychiatry. In a BBC interview 25 years after this work, Dr. Davies admitted the feeling that they had been quick to label certain symptoms as abnormalities that required drugged treatment. He said, "*They were not*

interested in understanding the patient's life, or why they were suffering from these symptoms. If the patient was sad, anxious, or unhappy, then it was simply assumed that he or she was suffering from a disorder that needed to be cured, rather than from a natural and normal human reaction to certain life conditions that needed to be changed." (Tim Keller, Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering, p25)

Now I realize how sensitive such words can be considering that one of the world's largest drug makers is just down the street and one of America's most significant medical schools is here in our city. But the issue is deeper than just medicine or pharmacology. It's also spiritual.

And so long before we had the advances of modern medicine or the availability of drugs to relieve pain, the Apostle Paul wrote the astounding words, "suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope." In other words suffering can lead to hope.

What if hope is not something that can be experienced in spite of suffering, or that gets us through suffering, but can be a result of suffering? I want us to think today about the hope of suffering.

Paul's thoughts on suffering that appear in Romans first begin to take shape in Thessalonians. Remember that this is the first of Paul's letters. He is not writing from a deeply developed theological understanding. He is writing from his heart with hints of ideas that would one day be made more complete. Continuing his opening words on gratitude, Paul moves in chapters 2 and 3 to recognize why their faith stood out: the suffering they were enduring. Paul relates to his own suffering and begins making connections between suffering and the life of faith. And we see the seeds of this idea that suffering can produce something good in our lives in Paul's *First Letter to the Thessalonians*.

So let's begin considering his words by understanding the cultural theology around suffering that would have been prevalent in Thessalonica. The society was popularly influenced by the teachings of the Cynics and Stoics who believed that hope is found in changing your thinking. Looking at things differently. Relying on your mental ability to rise up against pain and difficulty. With the right thoughts our suffering can be relieved.

This kind of popular theology still appears. How many of us have heard people try to comfort someone who has lost a loved one with words like, "They're in a better place." "God must have needed them more in heaven." Or when we suffer some pain a person says, "Don't worry, things could be a lot worse." That picks you right up every time, doesn't it?

What's going on there? People are relying on a popular theology that says, "With the right thinking, our suffering is relieved." The Cynics and Stoics are still around.

But look at what Paul says, ***"though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition."*** (1 Thessalonians 2:2-3) How much of

this Paul intended we can't say for sure, but he presents suffering in a way that contradicts the teaching of the Stoics and Cynics. He says, "we had courage in our God!" Not some higher level of consciousness. He makes clear that his and their ability to endure suffering is a by-product faith. **Suffering isn't endured by right reasons but the right resources.**

Holocaust survivor, Corrie ten Boom, said, "If you look at the world you'll be distressed. If you look within you'll be depressed. But if you look to God you'll be at rest." Coming from anyone else that would sound like fortune cookie wisdom, but when you know that came from a person who endured great suffering in her life, you have to think there might be something to it.

But notice what else Paul said. In our scripture reading earlier we heard, "***we sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for.***" (3:2-3)

Again, who knows how developed Paul's thinking was at this point, but he recognizes some important aspects of suffering. First, he says it's a part of the path we follow. Don't be surprised by suffering when it happens as if something went wrong. We all face suffering in different ways especially if we stand for things that matter.

But Paul hints at something even deeper. He is saying that **The benefits of suffering are understood in hindsight.** Paul would go on to celebrate how the faith of the Thessalonians got stronger as a result of their trials, that their suffering produced something good, but that wasn't understood in real time. It was discovered later with time and distance.

Last week all of Susan's sibling came for her birthday party and everyone headed home Monday. Her oldest brother, Steve, and his wife, Beth, had to fly home to Wichita through Houston, and you may remember last Monday there were heavy thunderstorms in the Midwest. Well their plane to Houston got delayed. When they finally landed they had to run to catch their connecting flight. When they got to the gate the plane was there but the gate had closed. They couldn't get on. So they had to wait hours before another flight and got home...

As it turns out they learned the flight they regretted missing ended up being cancelled but not until sitting on the runway for three hours! With time and distance we sometimes are grateful for the misfortunes we experience.

The Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier, in his book *Creative Suffering*, compares this idea to the whistle of a train. When it is approaching it gets louder and louder and more alarming but the moment it passes it recedes quickly and calmly. He writes, "*In the same way our view of events can change according to whether they are threatening us, are with us in the present, or belong to the past...It is only afterwards that the unhappiest experiences may appear to have been good for us.*" (*Creative Suffering*, p51)

As an example he tells about Dr. Robert Aggagioli, who founded the concept of psychosynthesis or the psychology of hope. He was sent to prison under the dictator Mussolini for being of Jewish race even though he had converted to Catholicism. He later would reflect on that experience and say it was the best year of his life joking that he had no telephone. What he meant is that with no distraction he was able to give deep thought to the ideas that led to the concept of psychosynthesis, what is known as the psychology of hope. His suffering literally produced hope.

When we can believe that our suffering has the possibility of leading to something good, we can have hope.

But there is one last thought about suffering in First Thessalonians worth considering. Paul said, ***“You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus...”*** (2:14-15) Paul lays out the idea here that suffering brings with it the opportunity to deepen our connection to Jesus. Again, the idea is in rudimentary form here, but listen to what Paul would later write to the Philippians, ***I want to know Christ and the power that raised him from the dead. I want to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death. “Then I have hope that I myself will be raised from the dead.”*** (Phil. 3:10-11 NCV)

This is the voice of experience, the voice of someone who understands that **Jesus meets us in our suffering**. Now mind you, I don’t think this means Paul celebrated his sufferings. I don’t think Paul would say to others going through suffering, “O cheer up! This is a chance to grow spiritually,” as if its all somehow good for us.

Mother Teresa told the story of being with a woman dying from cancer with her small children surrounding her. She said ‘I didn’t know which was the greater agony, leaving her children or the pain she was in.’ So I told her, ‘You are so close to Jesus on the cross right now, that He can kiss you.’ The woman leaned over to Mother Teresa and said, “In that case Mother, would you please tell Jesus to stop kissing me.”

No, Paul isn’t glorifying pain. In a very fundamental way he is simply relating suffering to the suffering of Jesus and recognizing from his own experiences, that in a mysterious way Jesus meets him in those moments and lets him know he’s not alone. In his company is one who understands his suffering and will be with him, and in that he finds help.

Sometimes it is hard to preach truths which I have not fully experienced. I can testify to the way I have felt God draw near to me in times of trouble, but I have never really suffered. I haven’t experienced pain on the level so many of you have. But I can say I have experienced this truth indirectly. I have witnessed it up close in the lives of people walking through very real, very intense suffering, and heard them speak of this mystery.

Many years ago now, we had a family come into our church. The husband was an architect working on a building project for us. He was a very bright, very loving man but he did not believe in God. Some of the claims of Christianity were just a bit much for his reasoned intellect. But because his wife was Christian, and she wanted to attend church,

he told her of this place where he was working and they started attending together with their six year old son. The man and I would meet to talk about faith. I affirmed that faith is not an anti-intellectual pursuit, but there is an element of faith that goes beyond knowledge. Deep down it is a trust in things we can't know in intellectually.

One day he decided to take the step of faith. His son wanted to be baptized so the dad joined him and they were baptized and became members of the church.

Not many months later, it was the first day of school. I got a call early in the morning, that their son did not wake up. He was excited the night before. Had everything laid and ready to go, but due to natural circumstances he died in his sleep. I remember getting there to the house. We cried, prayed, shared memories.

At one point the dad went out to the backyard to be alone. I wondered how he was doing and what this experience was doing to his young faith. I went outside to be with him. He said, "I just need to be alone for a while. That's how I process things. But I'm okay. I don't know how or why, but I have a strange peace." He said not long before being baptized, he was sitting in the chair with his son one night. And his son said, "Dad, you ready?" He said, "Ready for what?" He said, "To be baptized and join the church. Come on, Dad. We'll do this together." He told me, "It's so weird, but I don't know that I would be handling this the same without that step of trust."

Like I said, I can't speak of experiences like that in my own life, but I can share the witness of others who say that it's not having answers to all our questions that helps us, it's God's presence. And sometimes the questions that get in the way can become the way to the One who is able to help us when we can't help ourselves.