

Suffering... by Fr. Randy

Suffering is not a word or reality any of us wishes to linger upon in our hearts and minds. Yet, this is exactly the topic *de jour* in this week's epistle lesson from the Lectionary. 1 Peter 4:12-15 and 5:6-11 speaks directly, and without a filter of "polite conversation," as the writer takes suffering head-on. This is not pleasant stuff, or even easy stuff to talk about.

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed...Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you."

OK...but what we are suffering in this global pandemic is not only the physical disease that has claimed thousands upon thousands of lives. Millions are also suffering from the cascading effects of this event...people close and dear to us, as well as the faceless numbers of persons reported in the daily media briefs suffering from: racial inequality, food and housing insecurity, loss of jobs, the disparity of educational access, the fragility of our systems to assist those in mental health crises, the real-life fears and anxieties of our immigrant and migrant neighbors, access to healthcare, to name just a few. Our Governor Tim Walz boldly stated that the ravages of this COVID-19 pandemic has not just made us face the possibility of death from disease as the great equalizer, but has pulled away the veil and forced us to see the significant reality of the breadth and depth of inequalities which many continue to suffer in our communities.

To use 1 Peter's words, it feels like we are living through a "fiery ordeal" as the world is wrestling with suffering, in forms old and new. And there is a reality that we must cling to which is crystal clear: God has not caused this suffering. God has not allowed this suffering to impact us as a moment to teach, admonish, punish, or even harden one's faith. Truly, there is nothing good or redemptive about our suffering. *Suffering just is.*

Yet, the goodness of God is known by us through a God who knows us and our suffering. We are not wrong to wonder where God is when we suffer disappointments, disillusionment, disease, and disaster, because everything in us

teaches us that there are things God does not want, or desires, or wills. No, we are not wrong to be disappointed with God in these troubling times. But we may have more to learn. Because the God revealed in Jesus shows up always in the broken places of our lives and world. At times, we do not get the God we want, the God we've been taught to worship, the God we have a right to expect. In Jesus and his cross and resurrection we discover, not the God we may want, but the God we desperately need.

In the cross of Jesus, God demonstrates a passionate love for us that meets suffering head-on, and in doing so reveals the extent of God's grace-filled heart for you. *"Cast your anxiety and fear onto God, because he cares for you."* Jesus Christ is present in our suffering, experiencing our own humanity in his earthly life, being both fully human and wholly divine. The God who sheds glory to join us in our suffering; the God who leaves heaven to enter our hells-on-earth; the God who abandons strength so that he can join us, embrace us, hold onto us, and love and redeem us at our places of fear, is ever with us.

I believe that all of this matters because when we are suffering and disappointed with God we feel cut off and isolated—from God certainly—but also from our faith family. And this is precisely when we most need our community of faith—at times when we most need to be connected in this Body of Christ! It is of greatest importance to embrace that church isn't the place you go to when you have it all together, but instead is the place—and people—you run to, and personally connect with, when life seems to be falling apart.

The God we meet in Jesus comes for those broken and suffering in body, mind, and spirit, to be one with us and for us. And it is in these times and places of our brokenness and deepest suffering that we sense, meet, and are enveloped most fully in God's strong love. I pray that the God of the cross and resurrection brings you to new life—restoring, strengthening, supporting—lifting you up from suffering to true healing and everlasting life. *Amen.*