Redemptive Suffering

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Romans 5:1-5

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I doubt the name Helmut Thielicke means anything to you. He was a well-known 20th century German pastor and theologian. Thielicke toured the U.S. in the 1960s, visiting churches and seminaries. When reporters asked his impressions of America, he had favorable things to share about western culture. When asked to reflect critically on the western church, he observed that American Christians have an inadequate theology of suffering. He noted that westerners regard suffering as something unacceptable and embarrassing. The attitude that we can effectively eliminate all suffering will invariably lead to disastrous illusions. Suffering belongs to the very nature of this world. It will never pass away until this world passes away.

Thielicke’s remarks are no less true today. Western Christians still maintain an inadequate theology of suffering. The unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as guaranteed by our Declaration of Independence has somehow morphed into entitlement. We have come to expect in prosperous America a life of universal good fortune.

Yet there is no denying it. Everyone suffers. No one is exempt from it. Suffering is a universal Pressure Point.

I wrestle with how to talk about suffering with children present. While we might be tempted to shield children from suffering, we fight a losing battle. Suffering is common to all and kids figure it out. Soon enough, children will encounter bullies at school, friends who hurt their feelings and the death of loved ones close to them. I will speak later in this sermon about how to talk about suffering with children.

The classic, Biblical treatise on suffering is the book of Job. Job’s friends pester him with questions about what he has done wrong to deserve so much misfortune. When God
addresses Job at the end of the book, he does not supply Job with reasons for his suffering. As Frederick Buechner writes, “For God to explain the kind of things Job wants explained would be like Einstein explaining relativity to littleneck clams.”

The Bible does not offer a neat, tidy explanation for why we suffer. The “why” question is not the Bible’s primary concern. Instead, the Bible addresses a related question. What is God’s purpose in suffering?

I titled this sermon *Redemptive Suffering*. At first glance, redemptive suffering seems contradictory. How can suffering possibly be redemptive? There are substantial lessons, albeit painful ones, suffering can teach us. Our passage in Romans takes up this matter of lessons learned in suffering.

The first four chapters of Romans center on what theologians call justification—how we are made right with God. We talk about the big story of Scripture using three words—creation, fall and redemption. First word, creation. We are created to live in close relationship with God and each other. Second word, fall. We fall out of relationship with God and each other through sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God as well as neighbor. Third word, redemption. God redeems or buys us back into relationship through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Through Jesus Christ, God justifies us.

Paul begins Romans 5 by recognizing three benefits to justification with God. First, we have peace with God. In
verse one he writes, “Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God.” Second, we have access to God. In verse 2, Paul tells us, “Through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

The third benefit approaches justification from a different direction. “Having been justified by faith…we rejoice in our suffering.” In verse 3, Paul declares, “We glory in our sufferings because suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character produces hope.”

It seems odd for Paul to assert that we can glory in our suffering. Yet he does not mean that we rejoice for suffering. We do not rejoice for contracting cancer or suffering for the death of someone close to us. Rather, we rejoice in suffering, confident that God uses suffering to produce spiritual maturity in us. In Romans 5, Paul shifts the focus from justification—how we are made right with God—to sanctification—how we grow into deeper relationship with God.

The chain sequence in verses 3-5 illustrates how it is possible to grow through suffering. “Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character produces hope.” Moreover, hope in God never ultimately lets us down.

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings. Because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character. Hope.

Romans 5:3-4
James writes in his letter to the Jerusalem church, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (1:2-4).

The Bible does not adequately answer why we suffer but it does declare unambiguously that God redeems suffering. If you doubt God’s ability to redeem suffering, consider the cross. The cross is Exhibit A that God can redeem suffering. God takes the worst thing that possibly could happen (Jesus’ death on the cross) and turns it into the best thing that possibly could happen (our salvation to eternal life).

Tim Keller, a Presbyterian pastor in Manhattan, spoke at a memorial service after 9/11 to families of victims and national dignitaries. He acknowledged at the outset in this interfaith gathering that every faith has resources to share in dealing with suffering. He acknowledged, since he is most familiar with Christian teaching, that he is best equipped to speak about the resources Christianity brings to the problem of suffering. Keller said, “Christians believe that in Jesus, God’s Son, divinity became vulnerable to and involved in—suffering and death…On the cross we sufferers finally see, to our shock, that God now knows what it is like to lose a loved one in an unjust attack.”
God is not immune to human suffering. God enters our world of pain to redeem suffering. God dignified all those who suffer by entering our world of pain. St. Augustine said, “God has one Son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering.”

So what does this sermon on suffering have to do with my life? Three applications come to mind.

First, expect suffering. There is an attitude that persists in Christian circles that if we love God and keep His commands, somehow God exempts us from suffering. God’s job is not to keep us happy and comfortable. God’s mission is to transform us into the image of Christ. Sometimes, God uses suffering to get the job done.

God’s people are no strangers to suffering. Christians get cancer at the same rate atheists do. God does not give us a free pass on suffering.

Jesus said, “In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Jesus said categorically—we will have trouble.

Why is it, when we speak about the problem of suffering that we never talk about the problem of pleasure? We lament why all these bad things happen to us yet we never ask why all these good things happen to us. If we are going to ask why about all the bad things, we need to ask it of the good things also.
Second, learn from suffering. I do not mean to minimize or trivialize the pain you may be presently experiencing. It is not my intent to slap a happy face on suffering. The fact that there are lessons learned in suffering does not lessen the pain suffering causes us.

In my meditation on Psalm 119 this week, I came upon the verse, “It is good for us to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees” (119:71). Suffering gets my attention like nothing else. It forces me to clarify what ultimately matters.

Charles Dickens had this to say about suffering: “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching and has taught me to understand. I have been bent and broken—I hope—into a better shape.” Like Dickens, I have been bent and broken into a better shape through suffering.

Third, draw close to God in suffering. I read an article this week from a friend and colleague in ministry, Peter Barnes, who serves a church in North Carolina. Peter reflected on the recent death of his wife Lorie. “Many times this past year I asked God, ‘Why?’ Why did Lorie have to die now, just when her grandchildren were getting to know her, just when she was doing so much good with Samaritan’s
Purse? We had so many plans, so many things we wanted to do together. Why now? Why Lorie?”

He concluded, “God never answered my questions, just as God never answered Job’s questions. What I came to discover is that God gives me Himself. This is the sweetest part of the journey—to discover when all you have left is God, He is enough.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote the novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, based on his own experience as a political prisoner for eight years in Russia. The book eventually won him a Nobel Prize in Literature. Ivan, much like Solzhenitsyn, struggles to survive despite inhuman conditions and unrestrained evil in a labor camp in remote Siberia. The novel depicts one bitterly cold day at the camp in January, 1951. How can Ivan make it through another day? As Solzhenitsyn elegantly expresses it, “faith in God may not get you out of camp but it is enough to see you through each day.”

Expect suffering. Learn from it. Let it draw you close to God.

Today’s lesson has enormous implications for children. Scripture assures us we can trust God, even when circumstances of life do not make sense.

Consider a woven tapestry or needlepoint. On the underside, it looks like a jumbled mess of loose ends and jumbled threads. Yet turn it over and a beautiful pattern emerges. What looks like a jumbled mess forms a distinctive pattern.

Imagine your life as a tapestry. You look at it from the underside, a jumbled mass of loose strings and jangled threads. Yet consider the redemptive pattern God weaves into our lives. God, the master weaver, works everything, even pain and suffering, into our lives for good ends.