

Sharing the Burden

Suffering almost always leaves scars, scars that may be a long time healing if ever. Of course, suffering often leaves physical scars that are obvious, and such wounds generally evoke a good deal of compassion from others. For example, veterans who have suffered battle wounds, or people who have been injured in automobile accidents are usually the object of a great deal of sympathy from other people. But suffering also leaves scars that are not so obvious, such as emotional or psychological wounds that often don't evoke the same degree of sympathy from others, and may even become the target of criticism. For example, it hasn't been all that long ago that soldiers suffering from what we now call PTSD were often condemned, and still are by some even today, as malingerers or worse, cowards. While physical wounds eventually heal, emotional wounds may not, and in certain situations may even be passed down from generation to generation and affect not only individuals but even entire communities in the aftermath, for example, of a war.

Suffering of such magnitude as is the case in the Middle East today, and in particular in Syria and parts of Iraq, is going to leave scars among the survivors there for a very long time to come, and almost certainly will have significant repercussions for communities in that part of the world. You simply cannot put people through such horrors without it's leaving scars, even beyond the tens or even hundreds of thousands of people there who have been physically injured. Indeed, were the conflict to cease tomorrow, the suffering is going to continue for a long time, leaving behind a toxic residue, a witch's brew of both guilt and vengeance that's not going to go away any time soon. God help the people with those scars, because I'm not sure they're going to get much compassion, and even less help, from all the rest of us, who once the shooting stops are likely to turn our gaze and our sympathies elsewhere.

It's that, the lingering effects of intense suffering, that I want to talk about today. The effect that suffering has on people who have been through difficult experiences and who may have been affected in ways that may be even worse than any physical harm they have suffered. I want to talk about that in connection with our scripture lessons today, and in particular our epistle reading from 1 Peter—which, I think, is concerned with this same problem—and also our gospel reading from John, which I think is a good example of the problem, an example of the lingering effects of suffering, what suffering does to us.

We talk a lot about how different the Gospel of John is from other books of the New Testaments, even from the other gospels. It's true. John is very different, but one of the things that we don't talk much about, though it's getting harder and harder these days to ignore, is the way that John talks about the Jews. Even when the problem does come up, as it did in a recent article in the *New York Times* about performances of Bach's John Passion, a work you may remember that we performed here a few years ago on Good Friday, we tend to whitewash the problem with claims that John wasn't really hostile to the Jewish people, just the Jewish religious

authorities. While I do think that's true of Matthew, I'm not so sure about John. John's anger, and it's clearly anger, really does seem to be directed against the wider Jewish community, and it's so clear in places that I find certain portions of John increasingly difficult to read aloud here in church.

The only thing you can say about it, and it's not so much an excuse as it is an explanation, is that this is what happens when people suffer. John's community, the community of the beloved disciple, clearly suffered at the hands of the larger Jewish community, including—let's be very clear—other Jewish Christians, and their suffering left this residue of bitterness in their testimony (that is, the Gospel of John), a bitterness that over the years has fed a strain of anti-Semitism in the church that sadly persists to this day. Exactly how or why they suffered is not clear, though it may have been because John's community reached out earlier than even other Christian groups to include Samaritans, a step that may well have alienated much of the mainstream Jewish community.

But while this problem is most obvious with regard to John's gospel, it could very easily have been a problem for many Christian communities in the early years of the church, because Christians at that time were a small minority everywhere. As a minority they were very often the victims of at times out and out persecution and more often simple prejudice and bullying from the larger community, whether that was Jews in Palestine or Gentiles elsewhere. Such suffering doesn't always produce character. Sometimes it just leaves scars, scars that don't always heal, and that danger is the subject of one of the most neglected books of the New Testament, that being the letter we know as 1 Peter.

Peter is concerned here not just with the fact that the Christians to whom he writes are suffering, but even more with how they are responding to that suffering, the emotions that their suffering had unleashed. What were those emotions? For some, it seems, their suffering was an indication that something was wrong, since surely people trying to do the right thing shouldn't be suffering, right? Peter addresses that concern simply by pointing to Jesus and his suffering. If Jesus didn't do anything wrong and suffered greatly, why should later Christians think they shouldn't suffer?

A much bigger problem, and certainly a much greater concern on the part of Peter, was that their suffering had led to a desire on the part of some Christians for retribution, frankly, for revenge. That, Peter was convinced, was even more dangerous than the suffering itself, because suffering could be endured. Again, they need only look to the example of Jesus and other Christians martyrs who had suffered, and sometimes like Jesus suffered horribly. But suffering was one thing. To allow bitterness to fester in one's heart, though, to give in to the temptation to seek revenge, to want to make someone else pay for the harm done to us, that was something else entirely. For to do that was to undermine the very essence of the gospel itself, and render the death of Jesus utterly in vain.

Here, as he does throughout this short book, Peter emphasizes the example of Jesus, and he says something about Jesus that more than anything else is what this book is remembered for. Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness..." Today those words are almost always heard and understood

theologically, in terms of the doctrine of atonement, that is, that because Jesus took on the guilt of our sins and suffered the punishment for those sins, we have been freed from that guilt and any punishment ourselves.

No doubt Peter is saying something like that, but it seems to me that he means it in a much more basic and concrete sense as well. That Jesus is not simply taking on the “guilt” of our sins in a judicial sense, but is quite literally bearing the burden of our sins, not just my sins, but all our sins, so that we are freed not only of the responsibility for those sins, but also freed of any lingering guilt we may feel, and the even more pernicious desire for retribution. Jesus bore the burden of our sins, he took that burden on himself. So let it go! Let it go, so that we can get on with the unburdened life that his sacrifice has made possible. So that we can live, as Luke says of the early Christians, with “glad and generous hearts” and not with bitter and hate-filled hearts.

In the end, that’s what the community of the church is all about. Taking seriously the fact that Jesus bore our sins, bore the terrible burden of human sin on the cross, so that we can let go of that burden. And not just the burden of our own sins, but the sins of others as well, which means our forgiving each other just as freely as the Lord has forgiven us. No more guilt. No more vengeance. Just life together in a community of grace, living for righteousness without those terrible burdens continuing to weigh us down.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*