

Matthew 8:1-17

After Jesus had come down from the hill he was followed by a great crowd. And now a leper approached him, bowed low and said, "Sir, if you will, you can cleanse me." Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "Indeed I will. Be clean again." And his leprosy was cured immediately. Then Jesus said to him, "Be sure you tell nobody. But go and show yourself to the priest and make the offering laid down by Moses for your cleansing. That will certify the cure."

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came up to ask his help. "Sir," he said, "a boy of mine lies at home paralyzed and racked with pain." Jesus said, "I will come and cure him." But the centurion replied, "Sir, who am I to have you under my roof? You need only say the word and the boy will be cured. I know, for I am myself under orders, with soldiers under me. I say to one, "Go" and he goes; to another, "Come here", and he comes; and to my servant, "Do this" and he does it." Jesus heard him with astonishment and said to the people who were following him, "I tell you this: nowhere, even in Israel, have I found such faith.

Many, I tell you, will come from east and west to feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven. But those who were born to the kingdom will be driven out into the dark, the place of wailing and

grinding of teeth."

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go home now. Because of your faith, so let it be." At that moment the boy recovered.

Then Jesus went to Peter's house and found Peter's mother-in-law in bed with fever. So he took her by the hand and the fever left her and she got up and waited on him.

When evening fell, they brought to him many who were possessed by devils and he drove the spirits out with a word and healed all who were sick to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: *He took away our illnesses and lifted our diseases from us.*

THE HEALER

MATTHEW 8:1-17

Charlie Brown, Lucy and Snoopy are gaping at the burned out skeleton of Snoopy's dog house. Lucy remarks to Snoopy, "So your house burned down! So what? A little tragedy now and then will make you a better person! Man was born to suffer!"

Charlie Brown gives Lucy a terse reply, "He's not a man...He's a dog..." and turns and walks away. Lucy follows after him and shouts: "The theology is the same!"

In the final frame, we see Snoopy lying on the spine of his charred home reflecting to himself, "I don't believe it...Dogs were born to bite people on the leg, and to sleep in the sun!"

What are humans born to do? There is a question we have never resolved. Are we here to suffer as Lucy suggested? Is it good for us? Or are we here to pleasure ourselves as Snoopy believes? Why did God create us and what does God expect from us and why? Good question!

We continue Lent with some theological assumptions about all of this that I think are very much open to challenge. Traditionally, Lent is a period of giving things up to remind us of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. It is a

widely accepted notion, but I actually find it antithetical to the Christian message. The church is founded upon the joyous Easter event and has interpreted it from the point of view of the Cross being the expiation for our sins--Christ taking on the suffering and punishment for us, in our place. So if he has already done this for us, why do we need to keep doing it to ourselves? Is Lucy correct, that man was made to suffer? Or does Snoopy have a point: that we are made to enjoy life and to freely express our unique gifts as human beings (or as dogs, biting people on the leg)?

As we move deeper into the Lenten season, I see an opportunity to explore issues related to our faith exactly like this. And today, I wish to reflect upon suffering and its meaning for our lives.

One fact we can all agree upon when is suffering's universality. It is a core part of the human experience and it comes in so darned many forms. We have physical aches and pains, diseases and maladies that accompany us throughout our life spans. And then there is the emotional suffering which is undoubtedly even worse--the sadness, the grief, the anger, the unrequited yearnings of our souls, the fears and disappointments. It comes with the territory. So why do we need to inflict more of it upon ourselves during Lent?

Now if you are an existentialist, you will see all of this suffering as

entirely pointless. But if you are a Lucy Van Pelt, you will see suffering as somehow good for us--"A little tragedy now and then makes you a better person."

But how in the world can you possibly square that with the healing ministry of Jesus that is depicted in our Scripture for this morning? What do you see here? Do you see a man we profess to be the Son of God inflicting wounds on people to rehabilitate them or to make them feel bad about themselves? He challenges and provokes and pricks people's consciences to be sure. But inflict suffering? Never!

What we see is a healer. We see a man whose compassion drew large crowds of people who wanted to grow and could hear in his teachings a way to access something invisible and life-giving. He offered a connection to what he called the kingdom of God, a unity with the loving Creator that already exists within all of us. "The kingdom of God is within you." Jesus reflected to them the love and affection that God has for every living being. Jesus did not call upon them to practice masochism. He brought healing--knitting back together the brokenness in which they lived.

And what he challenged them on more than anything was their lack of faith. All the people who are healed in our lesson today shared one thing in common--their absolute faith that Jesus could heal them. It was trust.

They turned over their lives to him. "Sir, if you will, you can cleanse me."

"Sir, you need only say the word and the boy will be healed." And

Matthew's comment at the end of this series of healing stories is that Jesus came to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: "He took away our illnesses and lifted our diseases from us."

What I am suggesting is that we might benefit from a Lenten paradigm shift. Focusing on sacrifice in the name of manufactured suffering--heaven knows, we have enough of the *real* stuff already--is bad theology at best and a self-aggrandizing activity at worst. Reflecting deeply and profoundly on the gut issues of our faith at the points where our doubts, fears and hopes intersect might have longer lasting value.

So what are the questions of faith for today? Does suffering have any benefits to it and what does our belief in the healing power of Christ teach us? Here is what I would say. Does God cause human suffering to make a point? No. But God clearly permits it as a condition of life.

Why? I don't know. We are responsible for a lot of it ourselves. But God is clearly concerned about it and has given us powers to heal it.

What also occurs to me is that whenever we experience suffering, change is in the process of occurring. And when there is change, how we perceive that change will shape how we ultimately deal with it and whether

it will destroy us or whether there will somehow be healing that arises from it. How will each of you deal with the closure of your church?

This is not easy stuff. But I don't think Lent is meant to be easy. Life certainly is not! And managing sometimes horrific changes in our lives is anything but easy. It would insult your intelligence if I said otherwise.

Rather than belief, I would rather talk about perception. Because that is where we have the power of choice. It is also where the quality of our lives--the *real* quality--from a spiritual point of view, resides. People of faith understand that there are no real answers to a lot of our questions. Faith has nothing to do with trying to convince ourselves that this or that creed or belief system explains everything we want to know.

What Scripture does teach us is that faith is intensely personal. It has to do with trust. And what can be more personal than trust? Very simply, it is trust in the love of God for each of us. It is personal both ways. It is God's love for us and it is our love for God. It is our conviction that there is no real separation between us and that we are ultimately and eternally connected. It is extreme intimacy.

And each time we suffer, be it physical or emotional, we are given the opportunity to reaffirm our oneness with our Creator and our challenge is to seek and find ways to make something good come out of it. And isn't that

really what healing is all about? Healing is a process. It doesn't take place overnight. It is about trusting that given a chance, God will accompany us on our journey to wholeness.

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