

Reflection—Cathy Dempsey—Good Friday—4/14/17

I'm sure most of you are familiar with the saying that's become so popular in the last 10 or 15 years: "Suffering happens."

Okay, maybe that's not exactly the way it goes. The real saying that we hear so commonly these days is a bit more descriptive and graphic than that, and probably not appropriate for a setting like this. But the colloquial term for what happens basically does mean that suffering happens. And "Suffering happens" is really the theme of our Good Friday scriptures.

Suffering happens. We hear the words from Isaiah on Good Friday about the "suffering servant" and we recognize Jesus' experience on earth: "You were so disfigured as to no longer look human," and "You were rejected and despised by all; you knew suffering intimately," and "We thought you were being punished... but it was for our offenses that you were pierced." We know how Jesus suffered on Good Friday and we instantly make that connection whenever this passage is proclaimed.

But suffering happens to all of us. We all suffer—whether it's the physical pain of living with cancer, the loss of a loved one in death, the humiliation of losing a job, being blamed for something someone else did wrong-- suffering is as inevitable as the sun rising and setting. I think that is a big part of what Jesus is teaching us from the cross. He is teaching us that suffering happens—even to him, the Son of God. And he is teaching us that when we suffer, our God suffers with us.

Most of all, though, I think Jesus models for us **how** to deal with suffering. You notice Jesus neither resists suffering nor does he cling to suffering. He accepts it when it comes; he doesn't deny it, avoid it, or try to push it off on someone else. At the same time, he doesn't go looking for it or hang on to it when it's time to let go and allow God to transform and heal the pain.

In last Sunday's Passion narrative from Matthew's Gospel, we heard Jesus pray: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as You will." He's not asking "Please, please let me suffer," but he is absolutely prepared to accept that suffering if that is what comes to him as a result of proclaiming God's Word.

Sometimes we work really hard to resist or avoid pain and suffering. We try to power through, telling ourselves and others, "Oh, I'm okay. It's not that bad." Oftentimes we only make things worse that way. I have a pretty good sense of humor, but sometimes I use humor to avoid dealing with pain, especially emotional pain. Many of you know that back in January I took a fall and smacked my head on the pavement and got a concussion. Whenever someone would ask, "Oh my goodness, what happened?" my typical response would be to say, "Oh, I got into a street fight and the street won." My way of distancing myself from dealing with how scary and frustrating the whole experience was. Fortunately, I have friends who laugh and then say, "Okay, now tell us what's really going on."

Of course, there are also times when we cling to our pain and suffering. We nurse old grudges. We can't resist telling the story over and over again how this relative or that co-worker did us wrong—and we never allow God to heal us. Or sometimes our past experiences or

things people have told us have taught us to believe that we are worthless and therefore we deserve to suffer, and so it's hard to believe that God wants to heal our pain. So many of my clients who are domestic violence survivors have been lied to for years by their abusive partners who tell them they are worthless and unlovable—and it makes it very hard for them to believe that it's possible for them to have a life free from abuse, and it's really really hard to take a chance on leaving. I can't even imagine what that's like.

But God is all about transforming our suffering. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus healing physical and emotional wounds, if people were open to it. This community is full of stories of God healing our physical and emotional wounds. Sometimes the healing takes a long, long time, and sometimes we find God healing us more deeply from an injury we thought was completely healed long ago. We have to be willing and ready, though, to let go of the pain and let God heal us.

And that's what Jesus did. In his ministry, he accepted the criticism and the skepticism and the threats aimed at him by so many people. In his passion and death, he accepted betrayal and denial by his friends, he accepted condemnation even though he had done nothing wrong, he accepted the excruciating pain of crucifixion. And then, as we heard tonight in John's Passion narrative, when it was time, he gave up the pain and suffering: "When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, 'It is finished.'" And bowing his head, he handed over his spirit." And with that, Jesus opened himself to the ultimate transformation.