

Good morning. A special greeting to those of you who have been Zooming but haven't attended services at church. I miss seeing you and hope that we can be together at New Song soon. This morning I want to talk about suffering. (No...this is not another appeal for money or volunteer activities!) We all suffer, many people a great deal. And there seems to be a major uptick in suffering worldwide today caused by the pandemic, social unrest and global warming. This is a major concern for all religions and all people. People look to their religions for help in understanding and dealing with their suffering. Our Psalm today says that "Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy." This, and many other scriptural passages, announce a major benefit of our religion (and most others): the right kind of faith will help us deal with our suffering.

There's one thicket I want to avoid before I launch my take on "sowing with tears and reaping with joy." **Theodicy** has been a major subfield in theology: the attempt to reconcile what we experience with the nature and actions of God. You're probably familiar with the classic contemporary book in which a Jewish rabbi tries to make sense of why we, like Job, suffer, often despite our best attempts to be righteous. In the book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Job's "friends" are notorious for asking him, accusingly, why such "bad luck" if you're so upstanding? Such friends one could do without, but such bad theodicy is still common today. After all, a major motivator used by many religious people to

get themselves and others to be good is the promise of reward and the threat of suffering if you're bad. Unfortunately this accounting is too often said to continue after death! Such strategies not only rest on questionable theology, but they often drive people screaming from the religious tent altogether!

We all suffer. People the age of most of us have experienced loss of loved ones, multiple medical problems, divorce, financial difficulties, anxiety about covid, global warming or national politics.... You can't live very long without suffering!

Note that the joyous songs the Psalm declares that "people will sing" come not from being righteous, but from suffering. It's not that we should seek suffering; it simply comes with the territory of being alive. It's no accident that the first step on the spiritual path in Buddhism is recognizing that life is suffering. Nietzsche, a 19th century German philosopher, believed the path to spiritual growth is paved with suffering. He says "Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit. I doubt that such pain makes us 'better'; but I know that it makes us more profound."

Why? It's not just that suffering is ubiquitous, a common denominator in the human condition. Suffering somehow unlocks our hearts and allows us to enter the spiritual realm.

Jeff Wright, a story teller who has become well known for his podcasts about The Iliad and The Odyssey, came to his avocation not because he studied these

epics in school, but because years ago a reckless snowboarder blindsided him when he was skiing and gave him a concussion that handicaps him to this day. Unable to continue his successful high school teaching career, Wright had to re-invent himself around his handicap. For years he had only about one hour per day when he could think and speak clearly, and if you know much about teaching, that isn't quite enough! He says that the first step in healing and finding his way was the gift of his concussion: he had to be honest about who he was and what he might do. He had to "name the monster." Therapists understand that only by naming, rather than denying, our "monster" can we come to terms with it.

Thus Wright not only had to suffer to get on the right path, but he had to face his suffering squarely. What this necessary first step does is to help one admit, in a profound way, that we must begin by letting go, by giving up our pretense of control, and by being honest with and about ourselves. Yes, there are many things Wright could have done, and did do, to deal with his concussion; but first and foremost he had to admit that the limits created by his affliction created a new reality.

One of my most profound periods of suffering was when my first wife told me she wanted a divorce. I wandered (literally) for several months lost and terribly wounded. What got me on the road to recovery was an honest (and painful!) accounting of why this had happened and what it meant for the trajectory of my

life. I had to live in and through my suffering instead of trying to ignore or eradicate it in some way. Like Wright, it took me some time to emerge from that terrible dark night of the soul.

Wright's proposal for a second step is to find someone to tell the truth about your life to. This is particularly difficult when you feel like what ails you is your fault and you should/could have avoided the morass. You not only need to admit to yourself that you are not in control, but you also need to tell someone else, which can be even more difficult. As many of you know, I was extremely fortunate to find a guardian angel—Lori—who accepted me in my brokenness and failure, and who also nurtured me to health through her love. Not everyone stumbles upon a guardian angel, unfortunately, but I submit that our role as Christians is to help others heal from their suffering.

Therapists can help us with the first step. I only went to one therapy session as I was getting divorced, but the therapist unlocked my blocked awareness by asking me why I spent so much time walking in graveyards. Bingo! My old life had died and I needed to grieve it in order to move on. But as helpful as this man was in coaxing me dive into my suffering, he couldn't provide the love I needed to begin to crawl out of my hole. I needed to find someone who could accept the broken me. One night I found myself attending a country dance and this foolish young

woman took pity on me and asked me to dance. Lori and I have been dancing ever since! I certainly “sowed with tears and (then) reaped with songs of joy!”

There are many further steps on the spiritual path of recovery from suffering that Wright and many others discuss. Healing usually takes a lot of time. We often have to face the “monster” day after day until it simply becomes a familiar feature of our lives. Creating a new life can be a lot like what we experienced when beginning our adult lives: we can be lost, have many false starts and failures, feel despair, and so on. But hopefully you understand why dealing with suffering is a major spiritual challenge that can lead to redemption.

One other major point: care givers, those who love and support the person who is trying to recover from suffering, often go through their own struggles. Not the same as the person they are helping, but difficult suffering nevertheless. And like the person they’re trying to help, this lurch into distress usually is a spiritual journey.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention an especially good source for thinking through this topic in detail. Three years ago my good friend and colleague Scott Samuelson published his second “philosophy for every person” book titled *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering*. He says, “This book is about how people have found a point in suffering....However, much suffering seems needless.” I’ve

learned a great deal about suffering and many other matters from this very readable and wise book.

Today's lessons have two moments: living into one's suffering to open our wounded hearts, and having the faith that somehow we will survive and heal. Not that things will "return to normal." That rarely happens, whether it's in recovering from cancer, rebuilding after a derecho, or facing new realities as a pandemic forces us to change. One of the things I hope we are learning from Covid is that suffering happens, that the world is mostly beyond our control. So the faith that helps us see again or find a guardian angel is a leap of **hope**. Recently Eddie Jako, a holocaust survivor who saw his entire family eradicated at Auschwitz and suffered beyond our imaginations, died at 101. His memoir was just published last year. After all he suffered, his remarkable memoir is titled *The Happiest Man on Earth*. Talk about radical hope!

I think Nietzsche's famous phrase, *Amor Fati*, **love fate**, captures the essence of this radical faith. A life lived with passion, with celebration, with the deepest love, is one where you don't just accept your fate; rather, you embrace it. We live in a time of great stress, depression, anxiety about our individual fates, and also about our country, the world order, and life on earth. The biblical call is to accept and embrace our conditions, and from that embrace, where we find God, to live with deep compassion for ourselves, for others, for the natural world, for our fate. Amen

