

Sermon for Sunday, June 3, 2018
Proper 4, Year B

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians
is in many ways an extended reflection
on finding strength in the midst of suffering.

Unexplained suffering
can be a serious obstacle to faith for many people.

It was for me for many years.

I was very sheltered from suffering as a child,
and I went through a period in my faith journey
where every time I was faced with horrific suffering,
it led to me question God's existence.

I remember watching news coverage the morning of 9/11
and when the plane hit the second tower,
my first thought was,
"Well, there goes the notion of a God
who's in control of history."

I know that I'm not alone in my struggle
to reconcile senseless suffering
with the existence of a good God.

For whatever reason, we as human beings tend to think
that if we are following God
and doing all the right things,
no harm will or should come to us.

Certainly some suffering
is a direct consequence of our actions:

you touch a hot stove, you will get burned.

Many parts of the scriptures affirm this assumption
that good behavior leads to prosperity and safety
and bad behavior leads to suffering.

Countless times
throughout the “wisdom literature” of the Bible –
the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and the psalms –
we hear some version of the idea
that the righteous will prosper
and the wicked will perish.

There is something appealing about such a system,
one where our experiences are predictable
and directly related to our actions,
where people “get what they deserve,” so to speak,
where the world is just.

But the reality of life is often quite different.

It is easy to claim
from an abstract philosophical perspective
that we will be rewarded if we do good
and punished if we do bad,
but often our experiences don't line up with those beliefs.

Not all suffering is a consequence of our actions.
Some suffering seems to come out of nowhere, for no reason:

A loving and devoted father of two
is killed in an accident while vacationing in Mexico.

A horrific illness strikes a highly intelligent man

with a successful life and career,
slowly stripping him of the ability
to control his motor movements
until he becomes a prisoner in his own body
with the use only of his eyes.

Masked men break into a home
and attack several teenaged boys with a hammer
while they sleep,
leaving one critically injured.

Our reaction when we encounter such tragedies is often,
“Why me?” or
“Why them?”—
especially if we think we or they
were good people who didn’t “deserve”
the suffering that has come upon them.

Paul and his companions also experienced
unspeakable, horrific suffering.

“We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,
of the affliction we experienced in Asia,”
he says to the Corinthians near the opening of this letter,
**“for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed
that we despaired of life itself”** (2 Cor. 1:8)

“We were so utterly, unbearably crushed
that we despaired of life itself.”
How’s that for keeping it real?

When Paul speaks of his hope in Christ,
he’s not speaking as a powerful, privileged person
who has never experienced suffering himself.

He's speaking from the perspective of one
who was once "so utterly, unbearably crushed"
that he "despaired of life itself."

And yet, with God's help, he came through it,
and can now say that he is
"afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed."

Paul makes some pretty incredible statements
about the power of God in Christ
to overcome even the darkest of suffering,
and those statements are based on
having been through such suffering himself .

In hindsight, he has come to understand
that through his suffering,
he learned to rely completely on God,
that through coming face to face with his weaknesses,
he discovered God's strength.

Paul writes to the Corinthians to encourage them,
to tell them that "our hope for you is unshaken;
for we know that as you share in our sufferings,
so also you share in our consolation" (2 Cor. 1:7).

But notice something
about the way Paul expresses this to them:
he speaks from his own experience,
expressing his hope that the Corinthians
will experience something similar,
rather than telling them how they should feel

or what their experience will be.

Too often,

when confronted with devastating, senseless suffering,
people try to tell others how they should feel
or interpret their experiences for them.

They'll imply that perhaps the person suffering
is being punished or tested by God,

or try to explain a tragic death
by saying that God needed that person in heaven.

But such attempts to comfort others
often do more harm than good.

It seems pretty significant to me that Paul,
who was not exactly known for restraint
in telling other people
how they should believe or behave,
was wise enough to refrain
from telling them how they should feel.

As I read through the first 6 chapters of this letter,
I was struck by how completely the message
is framed in terms of “our” experience –
that is, of Paul’s experience and that of his companions.

“We” did this, “we” did that, this happened to us,
therefore “we do not lose hope.”
That “we” is not a prescriptive “we,”
presuming to speak for all Christians,
but a very personal “we,”
describing things he and his companions

have been through
and how they have come
to understand and get through them.

As powerful as Paul's experience of hope and confidence
in God's power and goodness is,
he can only make that statement for himself.

So we, too, as we reach out
to people we know are suffering,
can only share our own experiences
of suffering and hope.

The person who is suffering might tell us
that this suffering is bringing them closer to God,
but WE shouldn't tell THEM
that their suffering will bring them closer to God –
because maybe it won't.

All of us have different experiences of suffering,
and it's not our job
to make meaning of someone else's suffering.

When we feel like we have nothing to say
when tragedy strikes,
it's because we're not meant to have anything to say.
We're meant to simply be with people,
to hold up whatever light of hope we have,
wrought from whatever suffering
we have experienced in our own lives.

We're meant to let the light of God "shine in our hearts,"
as Paul puts it,
and be a living witness
that it is possible to come through suffering

with a faith and hope in God intact.

Sharing from our own experience
is not only easier
than trying to make sense of another's suffering,
it also has a much greater chance
of bringing actual comfort.

Author Anne Lamott
writes about spirituality and the life of faith
with no holds barred.
In her memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, she writes,

“I don't know why life isn't constructed
to be seamless and safe,
why we make such glaring mistakes,
things fall so short of our expectations,
and our hearts get broken
and our kids do scary things
and our parents get old
and don't always remember to put pants on
before they go out for a stroll.

“I don't know why it's not more like it is in the movies,
why things don't come out neatly
and lessons can't be learned
when you're in the mood for learning them,
why love and grace often come
in such motley packaging.”

But love and grace do come in motley packaging
and although “we are always carrying in the body
the death of Jesus,” as Paul says,
it is through that death

that we are joined to Jesus's resurrection.

I don't question God's existence anymore
when I encounter senseless suffering,
but I still feel deep sorrow and pain.

But within that pain, I have come to know, with Paul,
that God's power is made perfect
in my weakness.
That belief has brought hope to me
in times of suffering
and I pray that it would do the same for you.