

Reflection for Midweek Ecumenical Lenten Worship

How our faith strengthened us in difficult times is the theme for the speakers at these services. I take “difficult times” to mean times of trouble, times of crisis or hurt – times of trial, in the words of the Lord’s prayer.

Have any of us not had those times? My life has had them. I remember one I will share.

It happened in 1983. I was in a terrible car accident and was in the hospital for several weeks. I was a pastor back then, and a number of my colleagues came to call on me. There was one in particular. I’ve forgotten his name. But I remember what he said to me. It was something like this – that this time of being bedridden, on an enforced, extended break from a pastor’s normal busy days, would be a wonderful opportunity to read the Bible and pray and deepen my spiritual life.

I don’t know how that sounds to all of you. I found it tremendously unhelpful! My prayer was that the next time this man came to see me I would be out of the room getting an x-ray or a CAT scan.

Bless his heart, what this pastor was doing was giving me an *assignment*, when I was in no shape or condition to receive one or carry it out. I had the large task of recovering from my injuries ahead of me, and he was piling on top of that this devotional task he had invented.

But what he said to me raises questions. Does our suffering come with spiritual assignments? Is our suffering itself an assignment from God? Like a pop quiz when we expected an uneventful hour of class time – expecting another ordinary day, we are suddenly sent great physical or emotional hurt, because that is the kind of teacher God is and the kind of tactics he uses. We are in pain, missing our spouse and child, alone in a hospital room with a leg in traction, but it’s okay because it’s a holy assignment.

It seems to me that there is a noticeable strain of Christian piety which says that is how it is. And the Bible wrestles with the question, now leaning one way and now another.

But I want to propose tonight that is not how it is. I don’t believe that suffering comes with devotional assignments, I don’t believe suffering is itself an assignment from God. Time and again in the psalms we find the writers trying to motivate God to live up to his billing and rescue them from trouble. In the gospels we find Jesus healing people, not adding devotional requirements on top of what they’re enduring. In the Lord’s prayer we pray, “save us from the time of trial.” Get us out of it, keep us from going into it to begin with.

We can learn things from times of trial, sometimes. I probably have. But we only add to each other's burdens to think that suffering is an assignment in God's classroom.

There was another pastor who called on me in 1983. And I do remember his name. Richard Williams, an Episcopal priest, part of an ecumenical clergy group I was a member of. The car accident had been at night and he came the next day. He went first to my hospital room and I wasn't there, so he came to find me. I was in a radiology room stretched out on a table, I'd been taken there and left temporarily. I was a picture of misery. Father Williams came in and came over to me, he took my hand and said, "You don't have to say anything. I'll just stay a minute and then I'll say a prayer and go." And that's what he did. He held my hand for a minute or two and said a short prayer and then he left.

You see the difference from the other pastor. Father Williams didn't even ask that I talk to him. He lifted a burden rather than trying to impose one. I felt blessed by that at the time, and continued to feel blessed by it as I looked back weeks and even years later.

The theme tonight is how faith made a difference in a time of trial, and you will note that my two stories are about other people's faith rather than my own. Two pastoral visitors came because it was part of their discipleship to do so – mistaken though I think one of them was in what he said. As for me, I received their visits, and my own faith and discipleship were not doing any heavy lifting at the time.

But. Though my faith was not up to much on those days in the hospital, it *had* done something previously. It had made me part of the Christian communities that connected me to those two pastors.

And that gives the second point I want to make tonight. I suggest that it is our discipleship *in between* times of trial, our faith as we practice it when we are *not* in crisis, that makes a difference when those times of trial come. It seems to me that the way our faith makes a difference in times of trial has to do with the way we practice it on an everyday basis, rather than with special skills we summon up or tools we take from the cupboard when trouble comes our way.

I had practiced my faith by being acquainted with both of those pastors, but of course that was practicing it in the most ordinary way in the world. Christians get together with other Christians and clergy with other clergy. But that came to make a difference in a time of trial. Not necessarily the difference I would have wished for with pastor number one, I grant.

So what I want to offer us tonight is the proposal that it is our everyday discipleship, our day-in, day-out and routine practice of our faith, that is what matters when our days are interrupted by crisis, when we are rudely expelled from our routines.

Some of us may have special spiritual resources we unpack at times like that. But as for those of us who don't – that's okay. I believe that ordinary discipleship will do.

We know what the shape of that is. Many of us pray each day, a prayer we know by heart or free prayer. Many of us read the Bible routinely, perhaps even every day.

And all of us come to Sunday morning worship most weeks. That's the heart of everyday discipleship. Sunday morning worship is a kind of theater. Not for entertainment, but for deeper stakes than that. Sunday worship is where we perform the world as it should be and ourselves as we should be, always at least a little bit out ahead of where we actually find the world and ourselves, and sometimes very far ahead indeed. Sunday worship is the time of giving honest answers to the question of what is wrong with the world and ourselves, and opening our hearts, minds and bodies to what is right and to repair of what is wrong. Sunday worship is for casting out fear and anger, and welcoming hope and love and gratitude.

Sunday worship is a time of coming to a particular table, the one we hear of in Psalm 23 verse 5. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies." You prepare, we say now.

In the presence of my enemies. Those enemies can be pictured at a distance in space, that is the initial image the psalm creates. But they can also be pictured at a distance in time. They can be imagined to be things that have come our way in the past and may come our way in the future – things that dislocate us from our habitual worlds, things that thrust us into times of trial, things like car crashes and other traumas physical and emotional. And mortality itself. Enemies.

But in their presence, here and now – there and then each Sunday morning – we come to the table the Lord has prepared. That table is more than the eucharist alone. It is fellowship with one another, it is opening the scriptures to the lively word of God, and it is holy communion, the presence of Jesus in bread and wine.

That is the world we perform on Sunday morning, and these are the people whose parts we play, those who dwell in that good world where truth is spoken, peace is shared, and Christ is with us.

A special world in a way, but then again an ordinary one. Not a spiritual world in any abstract sense, but the commonplace Monday through Saturday world known as what it most truly is and celebrated for what it can become.

Times of trial dislocate us from that good world. We become exiles from it, for longer or shorter times. Some of those dislocated and in exile are very far away, and that distance is not an assignment to *them* – it is an assignment to us.

Sunday's good world awaits our return and longs for our return when we can do little for ourselves to get back. From it we have memories and hopes, and from it come emissaries to seek and find us. Some are well meaning but mistaken. Blessed others ask nothing of us, and hold our hands, and pray. May such as they find us more often than the mistaken ones. May we come home from every time of trial to the good world of ordinary discipleship, and to the table prepared for us.

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