

Suffering and Rejoicing

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1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

Suffering is one of the great questions confronting religion – any religion. Christianity, it must be said, doesn't have as close a focus on it as other faiths. Christianity has much clearer answers to the questions of sin – we are forgiven through Jesus Christ – and death – we are promised resurrection in Jesus Christ. Buddhism, in contrast, concentrates on suffering and offers a pathway out of Samsara, the loop of lives in which people suffer.

It isn't our prioritized concern, but Christians experience suffering and they think about it. "Suffering is a major theme in 1 Peter," writes Jennifer Kaalund at Working Preacher. "The word is mentioned twelve times in this short letter. This repetition makes it clear that the audience is experiencing difficult circumstances. And yet the writer wants to remind them that they are not alone in their suffering."

Nobody is alone in suffering, you know. Suffering is one of the shared experiences of the human condition. We don't suffer all the time, thank God. But we all know what it is from experiences of hunger and thirst, injury and illness, failure and disappointment, pain and fear, loss and grief.

The easiest way to understand suffering is that if you're suffering, you've done something to bring it on. It's easiest because, let's face it, it's so often true. My parents used to tell a story about a camping trip we took when I was quite young, maybe two or three years old. My mother had been cooking on a camp stove in a cast iron frying pan, and little me walked over and grasped the hot handle. I don't remember anything about this, but apparently they had to get me to a doctor, which was awkward because we were on an island without one.

You know and I know that we've done comparable things with rather more knowledge of the consequences than little Eric not understanding about hot frying pans. We've known something was hot. We've known it was going to hurt – sometimes hurt more people than us – and for whatever reasons we came up with at the time, we reached out and grasped the handle.

We saw lots of examples of this during the pandemic, people disregarding precautions, avoiding vaccines, even courting illness with dreadful consequences. A number of folks noted, aghast, that we are going to have to retire the phrase "avoid it like the plague" because, it seems, fewer people than you'd think actively avoid the plague.

Often enough, however, the easy explanation that somebody suffers because they did something to deserve it is plain wrong. Illness, including pandemic-borne illness, happens. It

just happens. It doesn't need any human intervention, knowing or unknowing, to make people sick. I see a dermatologist twice a year because my skin is vulnerable to sunlight. What did I do to create that condition? I was born. That's it. No further intervention was necessary. I'm not going to change it with exercise, diet, or medication. I can decrease the risk of skin illness, but I can't change the basic vulnerability.

Random suffering isn't satisfying. It can't be. People like life to have meaning, and when suffering becomes part of life, it should be meaningful. The simple truth is that sometimes it isn't. It's just suffering.

Early Christianity had to deal with a further example of suffering, and that was the crucifixion of Jesus himself. It could not be explained that he had deserved it – that wouldn't work. And it could not be called simply random. Jesus himself had said it was meaningful, even necessary to his work. As time went on, other early Christian leaders also began suffering, frequently, as Jesus had, at the hands of the authorities. That wasn't how things were supposed to work in a properly ordered world.

The world, clearly, was not properly ordered.

Dr. Kaalund writes, “[Jesus’] crucifixion was the result of an attempt to transform oppressive systems, to assert the importance of the lives of marginalized people, indeed, to challenge a worldview that suffering of the many was necessary for the pleasure of a few... We share in Christ’s suffering when justice is denied, when righteousness is not realized, and when the conditions for peace are elusive. So the author of the letter reminds the audience that they should not be surprised when they are standing for righteousness, fighting for justice, and are pursuing peace that they are met with obstacles and challenges. Jesus, too, was challenged in this pursuit.”

Dr. Kaalund illustrates two more sources of suffering. The first comes from the deliberate actions of other people. Some of these people harm others from outside the law – we call them criminals, and we have an entire structure of codes, enforcement officers, and processes to determine responsibility and to deal with their actions. Their actions bring a lot of suffering.

Some of the people bringing suffering, however, operate inside the law. Those were the people inflicting the “fiery trial” on the original readers of this letter. They were magistrates, city councilors, governors, possibly even the Emperor himself if First Peter was written during the reign of Domitian. Undeserved suffering has been inflicted by governments countless times over the centuries, and it has probably done vastly more harm than the operations of criminals, because they've got a lot more resources to do it with. Remember that Jesus' crucifixion was legal. Peter and Paul's executions were legal. Martyr after martyr died with the full assent of the law.

Slavery was legal. Keeping women from voting was legal. The death penalty for gay and lesbian people is legal in seven UN member nations. The Holocaust was legal. The family separations of

the first Trump administration were, as far as the courts have weighed in, legal. And the chaotic sweeps that have brought so much suffering to American cities have been, with some contested exceptions, legal. Legal, and by inflicting so much suffering, horribly wrong.

First Peter raises a further source of suffering: suffering as the result of doing what is good, and right, and true. That was the experience of those enduring the “fiery trial.” They were trying to follow the ways of Jesus, and like Jesus, they were suffering. As Valerie Nicolet writes at Working Preacher, “1 Peter reminds us that what is at stake in the sufferings of Christ-believers is not so much what they believed but what they did. Because they believed that Christ was Lord, and not Caesar, they strived to establish communities marked by love and solidarity rather than by hierarchy and a system of patronage and debt.”

First Peter invites us to rejoice in our sufferings, some of the most bizarre advice given us in religious literature. He could do this because so much of the suffering his readers experienced was of that last kind, related not to their mistakes or random chance or prejudice but to their own diligence in following Christ. Suffering can be an affirmation that one is doing the right thing, and that is a source of rejoicing.

But as Jimmy Hoke writes at Working Preacher, “Exceptionalized suffering lacks solidarity with all who suffer... A critical approach to this passage in light of Christianity’s power to inflict systemic suffering demands rethinking whose suffering counts. Instead of moralizing what and whose suffering counts, this requires asking what it means to roar with solidarity for all who suffer.”

Can we come to aid those who suffer randomly, or worse yet, for their own actions? Of course we can. My parents swooped me off to a doctor when I grasped that hot pan. It’s what we do for children. There’s no reason not to do it for adults.

But what about rejoicing? Do we rejoice within our sufferings if they’re random, or self-inflicted, or more related to something we can’t control about ourselves than actual virtue?

We can, I think, rejoice within our suffering if not because of our suffering, because we are never alone in our suffering. We are all beneath the mighty hand of God, or as the old song puts it, God’s got the whole world in his hand.

We don’t rejoice because it hurts. We rejoice because we have God with us. We rejoice because we have more strength, more confidence, more commitment, than we would have otherwise.

And we rejoice because we know that though our road has led to suffering, it leads beyond it to a better and brighter day. “...The God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

It’s a hope and a promise in which to rejoice.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson