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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church – Edina, Minnesota
Virtual Celebration of the Ministry of the Word for Holy Eucharist for
The Third Sunday in Easter; April 26, 2020

“We Are in Life!”

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

Note: Aired to the St. Stephen's Church Youtube channel with a Virtual Service of Antecomunion 4.26.20.

So, I don't want to bring us down on a lovely spring morning, but I've got some pretty serious things to talk about with you today, things that matter for all of us, things that are just a part of all of us. And that particular thing on my mind and my heart on this 3rd Sunday of Easter is... suffering. I know... enough of that already. But I hope you'll stay with me, because at least part of the center and meaning of the Easter message is born in suffering, is *because* of suffering, but maybe not in the way we often think of it.

And this is on my mind, because, frankly, Jesus brings it up. I know I must be at least somewhat foolish in Jesus' eyes, because he says to his companions on the road to Emmaus, *“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”* You know, necessary to suffer things like the dishonor, rejection and betrayal, the beatings and embarrassments, and the crucifixion. Well, yeh, I would like to believe all those things were not necessary, certainly not necessary for my salvation.

I'd like to believe that there was —and is— another way. Don't you think those two men walking their path of sorrow on the way to Emmaus would have wanted it to be another way for themselves and for their friend Jesus?

Now, I suppose I should just put my position out there for you... I think we suffer, because we care. Suffering is what happens at that frayed intersection between our desire and our reality. If we desire to be healthy, and we are not, we suffer. If we desire peace, and we are beset constantly by conflict, we suffer. When we desire the truth, yet are constantly buffeted with lies, we suffer. If we want good for those we love, and yet they do not have it, we suffer with them. When we offer love to others, and we receive instead hate or indifference, we suffer... because we care; because it matters whether someone is healthy or sick, at peace or at war, happy or not, truthful or not, loving or hating.

Now a cynical person might say at this point to just stop caring, stop wanting things, so there's nothing to disappoint you when you don't get them. But that doesn't sound very life-giving to me, or very true to our humanity. There are things worth wanting, there are things worth caring about, so I suppose it follows there are things worth suffering. Oh, I think there is likely plenty of suffering that is rather needless, because we can conflate those things we *want* with those things that we actually *need*.

People have suffered endlessly for the desire for riches and honor and glory and power and excess, yet I remember Jesus reminding us that it is faithful enough just to ask for our daily bread, just for those things we truly need to be whole. Jesus was not a cynical person. I really don't think he was into suffering.

So, why would Jesus tell his companions on the Emmaus road that it was indeed *necessary* that the Messiah should suffer? Why is Easter born of such injustice and grief as that caused by the crucifixion of this man? Well, generations of faithful Christians have held that Jesus' sacrifice was the necessary payment for our offenses, that the shedding of Jesus' blood was the only thing to requite and repay a God so offended by our sins. And, believe me, I agree that our sins can be heinously offensive. But I don't think it was blood necessarily on God's mind when God smiled upon the only-begotten baby come to live with Mary and Joseph. I don't know that it was blood on God's mind when a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." I don't even think it was blood on God's mind in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus implores, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. But not my will, rather your will be done." God's will is not the blood and the violence, but the unrelenting gift of love in the face of all suffering.

Look, I'm not sure I have any right or righteousness to imagine these things, let alone to speak loudly of them, but... I have to believe that, beyond all expectations to the contrary, even God would have hoped that Jesus' message of love and his call for peace and unity for all humankind could have been received... was worth a shot, at least. See, it may be that Jesus' blood has been a necessary part of our salvation, but I feel like the blood was our demand... not God's. And despite millennia of human interpretations to the contrary, trying to make God seem a brutal, exacting, angry, and offended deity, the deepest revelation of the nature of God is seen in the one who suffered with us while loving us to the very end. God can save us with a word. It seems it was humankind who needed the sacrifice.

So the suffering of which Jesus speaks on the Emmaus road is necessary not because God wills the suffering, rather God wills with love. The suffering is necessary, because we do not know always what we are doing, as Jesus said from the cross. The suffering comes at the frayed intersection of God's desire for our wholeness and our sometimes selfish, fearful, uncertain, and broken reality. We just don't always know how to love and be loved. And the necessary suffering comes, because God does know how to love. And because we matter. And because God cares, forever and to the end.

I want to be clear that I don't think there is any good in suffering, though we may find purpose in it. Pain for pain's sake seems a ridiculous thing, and I don't think that is God's plan. But remember, we suffer for the hope of what is good; we suffer because things matter, so we need to align ourselves and our hopes with the things that really matter for all of us, so our suffering, like Jesus' suffering, is not in vain. Did you ever think that perhaps Jesus' suffering and death was not a *payment* for sin, rather it was something Jesus could *offer* in hope and faith that, despite death and evil doing its worst, that God, the God of love would bring all things to right. When Jesus had nothing else to give, literally nothing, he gave his suffering faithfulness... "Into your hands, I commend my spirit." Sometimes, our suffering may be all we have to give, so give it.

There is an ancient anthem in the church's Burial Rite that I hear very rarely used any longer, and it goes like this... "In the midst of life, we are in death; from whom can we seek help? From you alone, O Lord, who by our sins are justly angered." Indeed. But do we think it is only Jesus destined to walk out of the tomb after suffering the pains of death? Or can we hold to the promise that the first Easter is also a foreshadowing of our own destiny with God? We all must walk through and out of the tomb. Through all the suffering, through all the tears, despite everything around us being turned upside down... Despite our separation from each other,

despite the ravages of disease, distrust, and dismay... I think we might have gotten the old burial anthem wrong. And I think it is Easter that shows how to set it to rights. In the light of Jesus' never-failing love, in the light that burns through the darkness of our brokenness and our suffering, no matter the shadows that so often accompany and surround us, the message is not "In the midst of life, we are in death..." rather it is become, "In the midst of death, we... are... in... life!"

That's what those men on the road to Emmaus experienced. That's the road I hope we all walk together.