

Purposeful Suffering

Acts 16:16-24
Philippians 1:21-30

My first preaching professor, Dr. Donald McCloud, had a saying. He hammered it home repeatedly. He would say, “Exegete! Exegete! Exegete!” I mean, which of us has not thought that? Exegete is a verb from the Greek. It literally means “to lead out of”. Exegesis (the noun form) means to start with the text, to derive its meaning from itself, to take its meaning out of it and it alone. Put another way, exegeses means **not** reading **into** a text, not taking our own thoughts and biases and inserting them where they do not belong. Exegesis is a core principle of Bible study and of sermon preparation. So naturally today, when we have an esteemed colleague of mine worshiping with us, I am not exegeting. At least not solely. Allow me to explain.

Taken on its own terms, our passage from Acts belongs to a longer story. It starts with the Apostle Paul having a dream in which a man beckons him to cross from Galatia (in modern Turkey) to Macedonia (in modern Greece). He obeys, and by so doing becomes the first Christian evangelist for whom we have written evidence of reaching Europe. Paul walks into the city of Philippi, and hearing of a “place of prayer”, visits the spot on the next Sabbath. He meets Lydia, a Greek woman of some means, who the author tells us is “a worshiper of God”. Paul baptizes her and her household. She invites him to stay in her home.

Which brings us to our starting point. A slave girl has “a spirit of divination”, a spiritual talent for recognizing the spiritual talents of others. She sees the force is strong in Paul and follows him around yelling about it. This **greatly annoys** Paul. (The Greek text here reads surprisingly like Demi Moore's character in A Few Good Men when she rises to tell the judge, “We **strongly** object.”) Though the slave girl is correct about Paul's qualities, after a while (the author tells us she did this for days) he has had enough. He commands the spirit to leave the girl. It does. This **greatly annoys** her owners, who have been making coin on her. They drag Paul and his followers before the magistrates and accuse them of two things: being Jews and causing disturbances. (We are left to wonder which they thought the worse.)

The magistrates order the beating and imprisonment of Paul and his followers. But the story continues. As the prisoners pass the night in prayer and singing hymns an earthquake happens. Their fetters break open and the prison walls fall. The jailer, expecting they have escaped, prepares to kill himself with his own sword. (In the Roman system his life was forfeit if prisoners under his control got away.) But Paul tells him they have not gone. The jailer falls at his feet and asks, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul tells him to believe in Jesus and baptizes the jailer's entire household. The next morning the magistrates order the prisoners' quiet release. Paul refuses to sneak away. He tells them he is a Roman citizen. This means he belongs to a privileged few. That privilege does not permit the treatment he has received. The magistrates end up apologizing and begging Paul to leave the city on his own volition.

That is the whole story, and so far I have done nothing but exegete it. Now, however, I am preparing to interpret it. And my interpretation will rely on ignoring most of it. I will focus on one aspect of the narrative, and not even the most important. I will zero in on the suffering those early Christian evangelists suffered for their faith. By so doing, I will inevitably introduce my own take on the role suffering plays in our faith. I have my reasons. The year of Our Lord 2020 has produced a greater than usual quota of suffering, forcing many of us to deal with it rather more than is our habit. As a group, we here today are better educated, wealthier and whiter than the world as a whole. This means we have been better able to insulate ourselves from suffering. But few of us have completely escaped it. And all of us need to know how to use our faith to deal with it—especially this year. Especially if, as was the case with Paul, our witness to Jesus causes some of the suffering we experience.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ,” Paul writes to the Philippians. What constitutes a worthy life? No doubt seeking to be as Christlike as possible forms a major component of it. Jesus asserted that loving God and neighbor summarizes the whole of the law and prophets. Acting out love preaches the Gospel more loudly than any voice can shout. Applications of this truth surround us in 2020. Make as personal a visit as the rules allow with a person isolated in a long-term care facility. Establish a dialogue with a person who has experienced the suffering caused by racism—and make sure to do less than fifty percent of the talking. Pay for the meal of the cop behind you in line at the register.

The episode we read in Acts happened in Philippi, where the Christians would some years later receive Paul's letter to them from which we read today. In our passage he concludes, "For it has also been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine." To what conflict does he refer? What causes this particular bit of suffering? Witnessing to Jesus as the Son of God causes it. Opening our mouths to talk about Jesus causes it. Breaking a sweat trying to live like him causes it. For we are *still* engaged in that same conflict: the conflict between believers and those who oppose God and the people of God.

When we witness to Christ, whether by word and/or by deed, we invite a fight. And Paul does not advocate pulling in our horns. He tells the Philippians not to be frightened of their opponents. This fight has been *granted* to them, *given* to them. These words apply to us as well. We have been given the call to witness to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Doing so will cause suffering. So be it. It may seem like spiritual masochism. But we witness not to invite suffering. We witness because we have the calling to witness. And we witness because by making the love of Christ real to others we can lessen their suffering.

In April the New York Times Magazine published a photo essay. Its black and white images were taken in and around Jacobi Hospital, part of the Einstein College of Medicine at Yeshiva University in the Bronx. It shows doctors in head-to-toe protective gear that makes them look like astronauts. It shows masked nurses from the bridge of

the nose up, with dark circles under their eyes and furrowed foreheads; victims' families waiting in the parking lot; custodians wearing what look like Playtex dish gloves carrying filled trash bags at arms' length. During March and April New York City averaged 800 COVID hospitalizations *per day*. It was a siege of biblical proportions.

Take a look at this image. Taken on May 4th by Eric Weissman, it shows a man who would give only his first name, DeSean. He lived about eight blocks from Jacobi, “up near the zoo.” For more than six weeks DeSean had been walking to the hospital and around its perimeter, praying for patients and staff. People had noticed. Some started walking behind him, praying as well. Some brought him food. When one daughter of a man dying inside the walls asked him to go away, leave them to grieve in their own way without “being confronted with some religious zealot”, a well-dressed man who happened to leave the hospital at that moment stopped and said, “Leave him be. He's doing the work of Jesus.” The man who said these words is Michael Zinaman, the Chief Medical Officer of Jacobi Hospital. He is an observant Jew working for Yeshiva University, a Jewish institution.

When we witness to Jesus in the midst of suffering we may very well invite trouble. ***But we will be witnessing to Jesus in the midst of suffering.*** We will answer the call to make his love real. We will strengthen our own walk with him. We will take the fight where the fight needs to go: precisely where people hurt the most. Presbyterians: do this most un-Presbyterian of all things. Speak about Jesus to those in pain. If necessary, use words. Just make sure to speak.