

SESSION 1.7 – The Suffering Self

Objectives:

- To give the participants a better understanding of suffering
- To explain the Christian meaning of suffering
- To give meaning to personal sufferings
- To help the participants respond to their own personal sufferings

Introduction:

Suffering surrounds us. Mental and physical illness, poverty and starvation, wars and violence of all kinds overwhelm individuals, communities, entire nations. We ourselves experience suffering. It might be broken relationships and alienated families, accidents and disease, failed dreams or boring jobs, in dying and death. How many people suffer from addictions, abuse and other forms of violence!

A terrible image of suffering now burns in the memories of so many of us: planes burying themselves into the World Trade Center and erupting in giant fireballs. Shock and horror led to grief and lament, heroism and vengeance—and to questions about God. “How could God allow this to happen?” “Where is God in all this suffering?” Those directly involved in suffering often ask, “Why did this happen to me?” and sometimes even “What did I do wrong to be punished in this way?”

Humans have long asked these questions. The whole Book of Job in the Bible is about the question of suffering. Christians have tried to discover meaning for suffering in studying and praying about the suffering and death of Jesus told in the Gospels. Some of the more violent biblical perspectives, however, fail to satisfy fully. Hearts and minds long for the God of compassion revealed by Jesus.

Scripture Passage: 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

3Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, **4**who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. **5**For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. **6**If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. **7**And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

8We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. **9**Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. **10**He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, **11**as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the passage, what reasons did Paul give for the sufferings that we endure?
2. How have you suffered? Are you angry with God for your sufferings?
3. Does your suffering help you grow or make you despair? Do you feel that what you are suffering is a result of your sins?
4. How can you deal with your own sufferings?
5. How do you help someone who is going through lots of suffering?

Reflection:

This world is no stranger to suffering. The last one hundred years--which saw greater technological and medical advances than people living in previous centuries could ever have imagined--witnessed suffering, pain, and despair on a nearly inconceivable scale. Disease and sickness, earthquakes and other natural disasters, war and genocide, poverty and death--a stranger to Earth might be forgiven for concluding that suffering was the defining element of our world.

And suffering in its myriad varieties continues to this day, scaled to fit our everyday lives. We--and people we know and see around us--struggle daily against a world full of pain, a world full of hurts that seem to serve no purpose beyond inflicting misery. Some people struggle to feed and shelter their families; others to understand the loss of a loved one, to find the strength to keep standing beneath the weight of a terrible illness, to lift their eyes to heaven and demand an answer to the age-old question: "Why, God, why?"

We each live unique lives with unique hurts, sharing in common an experience of a world that just doesn't seem to work like it should. Each of us suffers personally, in ways that no other person can understand.

Is there hope? Is there an answer to be found? There is, although we may not see it yet. In the meantime, this most important fact remains: we do not suffer alone. That is the promise of God. "... we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:17-18). "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows" (2 Cor 1:5).

At this very moment there are millions of people who are in despair, who are suffering, who are being tortured, and humanity screams: "Why?" If God is all-good and all-powerful why does he allow brutality and injustice? This is one of the major questions of human life, to which, throughout history, people have struggled to find a meaningful answer.

Many have sought to solve the question of suffering by treating it as a

problem rather than as a mystery whose meaning can never be fully exhausted. Buddha's basic idea was that we suffer because we have an illegitimate attachment to existence. If you sever your craving for existence, he thought, you extinguish your suffering; you reach a certain calm that is the door to nirvana. This, of course, sounds attractive, especially when you compare the mysterious, serene, man-figure of the Buddha, looking inward, to the suffering Christ on the cross.

Karl Marx believed unhappiness exists because of social injustice and inequality. His basic thought was that if you let the State take over completely it will distribute wealth equally and justly and a workers' paradise will appear on earth. Unfortunately, in actual practice, this resulted in people being sent to the Gulag (concentration camps) and much, much worse. In effect, Marx ended up creating a worse evil than the injustice he intended to correct.

In Christianity we discover two things which are unique and amazing. First, Christianity teaches the art of suffering. Second – and this is particularly emphasized in Roman Catholicism – Christianity teaches the meaning of suffering.

The holy art of suffering is not easy to learn because of our rebellious nature; that is due to original sin. When we suffer we have a tendency to add to our suffering. Such "illegitimate" suffering that is self-made is often due to such things as vanity, envy, self-pity, and, above all, pride. These can be overcome by our constant willingness to reject, disavow, and oppose such traits, while begging God with a "holy pestering" to liberate us by His grace.

Once we are liberated we begin to discover that the suffering God sends us has a profound and sublime meaning with which it is to be embraced. The French poet Paul Claudel said that Christ did not come to abolish suffering but to join in our suffering. He did not come to abolish the cross but to lie down on the cross to save us.

Suffering on this earth is meant to be an expression of that love. When we love someone we start to tremble because we know that despite all our love we are not able to protect that person from their own suffering, sickness, poverty, and death.

When Christ was crucified, who was at the foot of the cross? His mother. Imagine the torture! But what did she do? She suffered with Him. In our pragmatic society we are so utilitarian in our views that I hear people say: "They are sick in the hospital. There is nothing I can do, so why go there". We all know, though, if we have suffered, that to have someone present—though the person cannot do a single thing to relieve the suffering—they can simply say, "I am here and I am suffering with you". If you love someone, you want to suffer with the beloved. Love in the face of sorrow does not seek isolation but wants to take on that pain as its own. This is an expression of authentic love that endorses suffering because the beloved one is suffering.

Then comes the beautiful thing about Christianity. The greatest love that exists manifests itself in giving one's life for one's friend - and that is what

Christ did for us. He laid down His life freely, without seeking retaliation or revenge against His many false accusers. Not only did He suffer with us; He suffered for us so that the doors of paradise could be re-opened for us. The culmination of love is not only that you suffer “with” but that you suffer “for.”

The meaning of suffering for Christians is that when we suffer a legitimate cross sent by God, He is giving us His grace, and suddenly we realize that we are ordained to join Christ on the cross. In some way He is saying in this moment, “Come close to my heart that has bled for you, that has suffered for you, that has been pierced by a lance for you.” That is why the saints, when they receive a cross, see it as a way of coming closer to Our Lord.

The amazing thing is that when Christians discover the meaning of suffering they can carry seemingly crushing crosses and nevertheless have peace in their hearts and glowing smiles on their faces that radiate the message, “We are going to get there”.