

**Paul and the Byrds – Romans 5:1-5; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**  
**Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – Trinity Sunday (May 26) 2013**

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,<sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;  
 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
 a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
 a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
<sup>5</sup> a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
 a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
 a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
 a time for war, and a time for peace.

One of the hard lessons to learn, to teach, and to live, is the presence of SUFFERING in our lives. Notice that I did **NOT** say, **“One of the hard lessons to learn, to teach, and to live, is the presence of EVIL in the world.”** Indeed evil does cause suffering, but it is a mistake to equate all suffering with evil.

- SUFFERING is a reality in life.
- SUFFERING comes as one of the seasons in life, and God created life with seasons.

The fact that we don't like suffering does not mean that it's not real, nor even that it is evil.

Three lessons I want to look at, concerning suffering in our lives:

**(1) Suffering is real; life comes to us in seasons**

- (2) **Even though suffering is real, we are meant to live as victors, not victims. Suffering actually HELPS us to do this, unless we choose to live as victims.**
- (3) **Suffering helps us to realize that God created us to live in community.**

The apostle Paul clearly understood the meaning of suffering in life. He went through a lot of it. At one point, he gave a little list of the sufferings in his life:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;<sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;<sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.<sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

(Add to that that he spent the last years of his life in a Roman prison before he was executed. And YOU think YOU've been having a bad time?)

He knew suffering from experience, but even more: we know from what he wrote to the Romans, in chapter 5, that we heard today, that suffering was just a part of life. Acceptance of this was known as long ago as the writer of Ecclesiastes expressed it, and as Pete Seeger adapted it into the song *Turn, Turn, Turn*, first performed by the 1960's rock band *The Byrds*. (Seeger's version appears in the bulletin, to show just how closely he followed the Ecclesiastes passage that we read together.)

Perhaps it is the subliminal appeal of baseball:

Former MLB Commissioner Francis T. Vincent, Jr., expressed it like this: *Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often – those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers error to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.*

- (2) **Even though suffering is real, we are meant to live as victors, not victims. Suffering actually HELPS us to do this, unless we choose to live as victims.**

In the book *Falling Up*, by Richard Rohr, which is the June ReMarker Book Report subject (it will be available on line this Tuesday) one of the chief theses of Rohr is that we need suffering in order to grow. He writes, correctly I believe, the following

**No one chooses upheaval consciously. We must sometimes fall into it. Those who are so carefully engineering their own superiority systems will not allow it at all. It is much more done “to you” than anything you do yourself. Sometimes non-religious people are more open to change in life than religious folks, who have their private salvation project all worked out. This is how I would interpret Jesus’ enigmatic words: “The children of this world are wiser in their ways than are the children of light.”** (Luke 16:8)

And

**You must lose at something. This is the only way that life, God, fate, mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations and go on the larger journey. I wish I could say that this is not true. But it is darn near absolute. ... There is simply no reason for [you or me] to choose to leave [our] own comfort zone in life. Why should you, or would you? Quite frankly, none of us do, until we have to. The invitation probably has to be unspoken and unsought. If we try to on our own, the old ego is back in control under a new name. There’s not any change at all, just disguise. ... We will then only find what we are looking for. ... But failure and embarrassment cause us to look**

where we would not otherwise look. ... **Self-help courses will only help you, if they teach you how to pay attention to life itself. God comes to you, disguised as your life.** So we must stumble and fall, I am sorry to say. And that does not mean simply [hearing] about falling, as you are in this [sermon]. That does not take you out of control, out of the driver's seat.

That little poem by Shel Silverstein, printed on the tear off tab of your bulletin speaks several mouthfuls on his subject. It certainly speaks of the human predilection to try to hold onto control, AND of the choice of some people to cling to victimhood in their living.

### HELP!

I walked through the wildwood and what did I see  
 But a unicorn with his horn stuck in a tree,  
 Cryin', "Someone please help me before it's too late."  
 I hollered, "I'll free you." He hollered back, "Wait—"  
 How much will it hurt? How long will it take?  
 Are you sure that my horn will not scratch, bend, or break?  
 How hard will you pull? How much must I pay?  
 Must you do it right now or is Wednesday okay?  
 Have you done this before? Do you have the right tools?  
 Have you graduated from horn-savin' school?  
 Will I owe you a favor? And what will it be?  
 Do you promise that you will not damage the tree?  
 Should I close my eyes? Should I sit down or stand?  
 Do you have insurance? Have you washed your hands?  
 And after you free me – tell me what then?  
 Can you guarantee I won't get stuck again?  
 Tell me when. Tell me how.  
 Tell me why. Tell me where ...."  
 I guess he's still sittin' there.

By Shel Silverstein, *Falling Up*

**Yes, it really is about humans and not just unicorns.**

Our suffering causes us to let go of our control. And it is in this, that we are healed and taught by God.

Some people cling so tightly to control that the only thing they feel they can own is the name “victim,” and unfortunately it becomes HABIT in their lives. Before very long, they not only are NEVER HEALED but somehow find their whole life’s course is that of a victim. **Do you know anyone like that?**

You have to let go, in order to grow. Even Jesus had to let go, (“**Not my will, but thine!**”) in order to go to the cross, in order that we could know the power and purpose of Resurrection, in order for even death to be conquered.

Some folks, in their unwillingness to let go of control, choose victimhood and never get off the cross. Resurrection is God’s proof of bringing each of us through suffering to victory. It appears that some people, **and unicorns**, choose not to accept it.

### **Finally (3) Suffering helps us to realize that God created us to live in community.**

One of the great lessons in the very, very confusing doctrine of THE TRINITY – God the Creator, God the Son, and God the Spirit – is **the Sacred nature of Community**. In the triune God, Community is lived. Although we may be more attune to one of the three at any given time, the doctrine of the Trinity is that wherever one is, all three are present. They eternally live in holy community.

We are made in the image of God. We are meant to live in community.

Jesus demonstrated the proto-type of how the human life is meant to be lived. He divided his earthly time between three different venues:

- (a) He spent time in solitude -- times when the disciples could not find Him because He was alone up on a hill, early in the morning, in prayer with God.
- (b) He spent time with a close group of intimate friends, the disciples.

(c) He spent the rest of His time with the larger group, with what we might call the Church, that he founded.

It's the design for us to follow.

Even when Jesus went to the Garden to pray, "on the night before He gave Himself up for us" He took some of His closest friends to be with Him.

**Q: Why did Jesus eat with sinners? A: Because He did not like to eat alone.**

When we go through our **valley of the shadow** life experiences, we need one another. We need one another, if for nothing else than to listen, and to share.

We don't always need to try to FIX one another, just to share in community, so folks don't feel alone, so they can see life through some keyhole other than the keyhole of victimhood, so folks don't begin to self-center their pain into a permanent state of victimhood.

In particular, we need to be careful to not try to provide answers to the suffering. One of the reasons that AA chose to couch their 12 Step Model in a sense of Spirituality and NOT religion was stated by co-founder Bill Wilson:

**"The problem with organized religion is their claim how confoundedly right all of them are."** *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p 5

**Suffering may be one of the few times that some people are willing to let the Body of Christ into their life.** We ought not spoil it by trying to act like we know all the answers. **As the Body of Christ we need to love people, not try to fix them. Indeed, it is in our loving them, that WE may learn the real answers, other than the simple solutions we thought we knew.**

**KNOW THIS FOR SURE: LOVING PEOPLE IS NEVER A VALID EXCUSE, NOR AUTHORIZATION FROM GOD, FOR TRYING TO MAKE THEM LOOK LIKE US.**

**WE JUST LOVE THEM; LET GOD DO THE RESHAPING.**

- Suffering is part of the season and rhythm of life.
- Suffering comes to us all.
- Suffering is meant to teach us, in ways that nothing else can.
- Suffering is not meant to defeat us. It is meant to take us through the valley of victimhood up to the mountain of Victory.
- We need one another, as community, as quiet friends, not as Answer-People and Fixers, as we go through the Valley.

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- **Know that when it rains on your parade, that it rains on the just and the unjust alike. Know that YOUR parade is not the purpose of life.**
  - **Know that when it rains on your parade growth is also being provided for the food that you will eat and for the flowers that will bring beauty into your life. Beauty is as important as any other lesson in life to demonstrate power beyond you.**
- **Know that when it rains on your parade, you don't need to stay out in the rain by yourself getting soggy and cold. The Body of Christ is always close by to offer you the comfort of a warm room and a cup of soup for your body and soul.**
  - **Know that when it rains on others, YOU are part of that Body of Christ.**

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**