

Rev. Mark Moline

Sermon 10/7/18 Suffering

In this morning's second lesson, we read, "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation 'perfect' through sufferings." Christ is perfected through suffering."

Saint Paul reiterates this point by writing in his letter to the Romans, "We are joint heirs with Christ if in fact we suffer with him so that we may be glorified with him."

Suffering is related to our faith. I do believe in miraculous healing, and I believe we ought to pray asking for healing. We ought to expect it. But Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but your will be done!" I've known too many folks of mighty faith who suffered greatly. Paige was one of my parishioners at the Mission in East Atlanta. She was an active young woman in her late 30's who attended the 10:30 AM service, and she would often come late because she would schedule her chemo sessions for early on Sunday morning and then try to make it to church on time.

One day she asked for a specific appointment to talk to me about "**something important.**" She arrived on time and explained that her cancer had worsened and the doctors had given her just four more months to live. She did die four months later, just as the doctors predicted. That does not mean that her faith was just too weak - quite the contrary.

The only thing the rest of us could see out the window of her well lit room at Emory Hospital was the darkness of the early morning hours. Paige's husband stood between her and the dark windows. She had been pretty much out of it for a couple of hours when she articulately and clearly told him, "Get out of the way, I

can't see." He responded as he stepped to one side, "Get out of the way of what?" Paige was looking out the window as she smiled and answered, "The Shining Man, He's coming." She then died.

She hadn't minced words the day of her appointment with me. She told me she didn't have time to waste. She would be dying soon and simply wanted me to explain how she could know for certain that she was going to heaven.

She didn't talk about suffering, but we talked about trust and faith as our appropriate free-will response to love / love freely given by an unseen God whose very essence is love. We talked about repentance and then we went to the Book of Common Prayer and both of us renewed our baptismal vows complete with those wonderful interrogatories: Do you renounce Satan? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world? Do you renounce sinful desires? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in His grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey Him as your Lord?

Paige very honestly answered all of those questions in the affirmative, and in her own answers, she found the **blessed assurance** she was seeking.

Then we turned to the back of the book and reviewed some of the specific prayers, and there she found the Prayer attributed to St. Francis, that same prayer we said Thursday evening during the Blessing of the Animals: and she honed in on that very compelling line, "it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." She loved that prayer and she was at peace.

About two years later I learned of my own diagnosis of cancer. The Doctor told me it didn't look good and I was scared and returned home that day, took my prayer book and found a little solitude.

I very specifically replicated that meeting with Paige. I really believe on that day Paige was smiling down at me from heaven as her life and suffering ministered to me. I could almost hear her say, Okay Father Mark - it's your turn. I repeated the prayers and reflections and asked God to give me some of Paige's courage.

Managing our own mortality is not a clinical, nor even solely intellectual exercise. It is a deeply spiritual phenomenon to be experienced in community on God's time schedule. It is possible for those dealing with their own emotions to be present for others in their times of suffering. It was possible for the "Wounded Healer" of the Talmud to be present for others in times of grief and suffering. He was not without his own wounds; in fact, they were the source of healing for others. He didn't keep them hidden; he kept them bound so he could respond quickly to those in need of ministry. Henri Nowen writes, "*A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for new vision. Sharing weakness then becomes a mutual deepening of hope, and a reminder to one and all of the coming strength.*"¹

¹ Nowen, Henri J. M. [The Wounded Healer](#) 1979 Doubleday