

Hollomon Sermon

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Please pray with me:

Holy spirit, we take this moment to pause, to listen for your guidance. Be patient with us, as we find our way back to you from the places where we got lost. Help us to slow down, to ignore distractions, and to listen for your voice in our hearts. And may my words this morning be a source of light, however dim, as we seek the true light of your divine love and truth.

Amen

Good morning. I realize that mine hasn't been a familiar face here at First Church for a while. Since I've moved to Gloucester, my attendance has mostly been virtual, watching the broadcast and hosting the contemplative gathering every Monday afternoon. So I am particularly appreciative of this opportunity to be with you in person.

Let me start by saying something I sense we are all feeling: We are surely in a dark time. It is a time when our deepest values, of treating one another with dignity and respect, of adherence to democratic principles and processes, of caring about our precious earth..... these values are under assault.

It is a stressful, and confusing time. It's hard to know how to feel, or what to do.

It is not unlike the era when Jesus walked among us some 2000 plus years ago. He too found himself under an oppressive regime. He too found his fellow human

beings were being grossly mistreated.

Which led me to ask myself — what is the spiritually mature response to witnessing injustice and the disrespect of what we hold to be precious?

The Hebrew gospel reading for today provides a partial answer. The prophet Isaiah is saying that God doesn't want us to waste our time making ritualized sacrifices. That won't help.

Instead, we are told to “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

A tall order, to be sure, but ... the suggestions make sense. Yes?

And, from the second reading, here are the guiding words from the gospel of Luke: Wake up. Pay attention to what you care about. for “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

So... We need to wake up, to pay attention to what is happening. We need to leave aside our distractions, and our virtue signaling sacrifices, and pay attend to what, and who, we genuinely care about. And then do something about it.

Okay. Got it.

And yet.... (those of you who know me knew those two words were coming) That's not all. There's something

underneath this guidance. Something that needs to be unearthed.

In my understanding, Jesus's first response was to suffer. His deep care necessitated a deep suffering. That is one of the costs of empathy and love. We hurt for those, and what, we love.

Let me put on my psychologist's hat for a moment. As a psychotherapist, my job is to be present in mind and heart with the person who is suffering. To be with them in their suffering, and to do what I can to relieve it. Noticing their suffering, recognizing it, and then being with it is the first step. We might call it "from witness to with-ness." Only in being with their suffering can we begin to relieve it.

However, in order to be present with another's suffering, I need to look at what happens to me. My first impulse might be to do something to get rid of the suffering. To help them feel better. And, if I'm honest with myself, my motivation might well be to relieve my own suffering by helping my client relieve theirs.

So learning to be with my own suffering is an essential practice. More about that a bit later.

When I turn my gaze outward, and look at what's happening around me - to the rain forests of the Amazon, or to the glaciers on my beloved Mt. Hood, or to the institutions of our government, or to the unhoused person on the street — I suffer. I can't help it. When I see a dear friend in angst and turmoil, I suffer.

Caring for the planet, or for someone we love, involves suffering. It just does.

The alternative, as we see all too prevalently around us, is sociopathy: A diseased mind that is incapable of feeling empathy, unable to experience others as real, as mattering, as a source of joy or suffering.

So, I think Jesus didn't show us a way out of our suffering, he showed us a way through it. That's what an incarnational faith is all about. Jesus became human, and suffered with us, and for us.

Now I want to dolly back a bit, and take a more systemic look at this business of suffering. In particular, I'm going to draw some parallels between some misguided notions of Christianity, and some implications of consumer capitalism.

Too often, Christians believe that their suffering is an indication that they are somehow at fault. They didn't pray hard enough, or love hard enough, or give enough. The implication being that, had they been a better Christian, they wouldn't be suffering.

Interestingly, Job's quote friends unquote, said the same thing to him — it was his fault because he had done something wrong. But.... he hadn't.

And this brand of distorted Christianity also offers relief from suffering — It's all part of God's plan. He's in charge. It's all good.

Capitalism says the same thing — that your poverty is your own fault. After all, capitalism means that anyone can lift

themselves out of poverty by dint of their own diligence and hard work. So, if you are poor and suffering, it's your own fault. And we're going to be okay, because the Unseen Hand will make all things well.

But... here's the thing. As a sensible explanation for suffering, both ideologies are wrong. Suffering is an integral part of life. It's not necessarily an indication that there's anything wrong with us. Indeed, often it means there's something right - it means we care, it means what's happening isn't okay. It means we hurt because people we love are hurting.

Recently, one of our guiding lights passed away: Joanna Macy. She was truly a luminary, whose wisdom emanated from her as a kind of incandescence. Here's something she wrote:

We are capable of suffering with our world, and that is the true meaning of compassion. It enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings. Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the waters polluted from mines in the Rockies. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief, and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity and your maturity. It is a measure of your open heart, and as your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal. That is what is happening as we see people honestly confronting the sorrows of our time.

I think that part of what makes this business of suffering so challenging is that we're not very good at it. Much of our current cultural orientation is designed to avoid the feeling of suffering. Take this pill, drive this car. You'll feel better. Even what Trump is doing — Don't worry about global warming, or history, or slavery, or DEI, or

anything like that. Everything's okay. It's a very powerful message, as most of us have little practice in suffering without collapsing into despair, self-blame, paranoia, or whatever seductive alternative arises.

I know, we've all heard the slogan "Pain is necessary, suffering is optional". I don't believe that for a minute. Pain is one thing, suffering is another. They happen in different realms. Pain is a temporary sensation; suffering is an on-going experience of the psyche. As I said earlier, suffering is a necessary corollary of being a caring person.

The Quaker and wise elder Parker Palmer put it this way: "Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering."

So, let's spend some time together looking at ways to experience our suffering in a wholesome way. Here's my first suggestion, one I learned from Buddhist practice: Neither indulge nor repress.

If we indulge in your suffering and let it have it's way with us, it can switch to depression, or to our becoming hyperactive. If we repress our suffering - by distraction, or dissociation, or denial — we deny our heart, we deny our own truth.

Instead, be with your suffering. Be curious about it. Learn from it. What is it teaching you? How, precisely does it touch you? What might it mean for you?

Yes, things are not as they should be. And knowing that hurts. Knowing that brings suffering. Because we care. Because it matters.

So, the first practice is to simply be with our suffering, neither indulging or repressing. Simply being with. Learning from.

Here's a second practice: Share your experience with others. Remember the familiar saying "Joy shared is doubled; sorrow shared is halved."

In my years as a psychotherapist, I've come to learn that there are two aspects of suffering: the first is the damage itself - the hurt, the betrayal, the stab in the heart. The second is being alone in our suffering. We can't do anything about the former, but we can about the latter. Reach out. Trust someone. Take a risk. See what happens.

But... you say... what about hope? What role does hope play in all this? Is hope the antidote to suffering? If I suffer, does that mean I'm without hope?

Not at all.

Hope is the opposite of despair. And despair means nothing matters anymore. It's over. We're toast. Hope, as I've come to understand it, is the experience of things mattering. It's not a prediction that everything will be all right. It's not the naive faith that somehow things will work out. Rather, Hope is the experience of things being worth it. Our life is worth it. The lives of those we love are worth it. The lives of starving Palestinians are worth it.

For me, that's what Jesus taught. All of this — being born, becoming adult, living, feeling joy, suffering, dying — it's all worth it. Not because we will live forever; Not

because we are saved. Not even because we are loved.

It's worth it because that's the experience of caring.

That's the experience of having a heart.

Let me close with this amazing poem by the American poet,

Langston Hughes, titled, simply, "Wealth"

From Christ to Ghandi

Appears this truth —

St. Francis of Assisi

Proves it, too:

Goodness becomes grandeur

Surpassing might of kings.

Halos of kindness

Brighter shine

Than crowns of gold,

And brighter

Than rich diamonds

Sparkles

The simple dew

Of love.

Amen

