

## **Acknowledging Suffering**

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

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It is polite to try to shield people from their own sufferings. Perhaps it might involve redirecting their attention to something else, downplaying it, being overly optimistic about overcoming it, or even lying to them about their diagnosis. All these approaches have their place, but we must be aware that society as a whole has indoctrinated us into the idea that suffering is something to skirt around as much as possible.

In our Gospel reading from *Matthew*, Peter was being polite. Whenever Jesus predicted that his message was going to get him into trouble and that he would suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, Peter said, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.” In other words, ‘maybe it won’t be that bad; let’s be more optimistic; people like you so that can’t be true.’ Jesus was not comforted by Peter’s response at all. He replied to Peter, “get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.” For Jesus, it was more important to acknowledge the suffering that would come his way than to look for the path of least resistance.

*Jeremiah* in the First Reading was in a similar position. His mission of being the voice of God was bringing him mockery from the people and the feeling of abandonment by God. Contemplating the suffering that laid before him and the possibility of choosing another path, he wrestled internally with God. He wrote, “I say to myself, I will not mention [God], I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.” As it turned out, Jeremiah could not NOT remain true to his mission. He acknowledged his sufferings.

Finding a way around suffering or trying to shield someone from their suffering isn't always comforting or helpful. While we certainly must try to limit the amount of suffering in our world, especially the unnecessary suffering that comes from war, violence, hatred, and lack of food, water, shelter, and healthcare, some suffering will inevitably come our way.

Sometimes the best way to empathize with suffering is to simply acknowledge it. By acknowledging it, we are giving others permission to accept whatever comes their way. We are telling them that they don't have to waste any more time, energy, and money running away from it. Suffering may be God's way of bringing about the transformation and renewal of our minds.

As Christians, we should understand this quite well. Our central symbol is the cross and Jesus told us, "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Always looking for the path of least resistance or the path without suffering isn't Christian. We acknowledge our suffering and we move ahead. As the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr puts it, "the way through is always much more difficult than the way around. Cheap religion gives us the way around. True religion gives us the way through." (*The Wisdom Pattern*, 192) Let us practice true religion.

*Acknowledging suffering is the way forward for a Christian.*

*Question: What suffering am I avoiding or denying?*

Again, some suffering is excessive and needs to be lessened. But much of our suffering can help shape our character, purify our longings, and lead us to God. May we 'offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, our spiritual worship.'