

Twentyninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Learning Through Suffering

October 21, 2018

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The ancient Greeks had a saying: “Manthonomen pasch_”---“We learn through suffering.” In the letter to the Hebrews, Paul says the same of Christ. It was through his sufferings that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, learned what it meant to be human. Here, then, Greek and Jew, pagan and Christian agree. It is through our suffering that we are schooled in our humanity. That what suffering has to teach us gives our lives meaning and purpose. That paradoxically a life without suffering is a life without purpose. Or in Christian language--we find our salvation only by taking up our cross.

But what can this mean? When we suffer our lives can seem so pointless. And when we suffer at the hands of others we can feel so angry, so resentful and at the same time, so powerless. But the reading from Hebrews is saying the opposite--that paradoxically, suffering can empower us. For suffering schools us in compassion. Our contemporary culture encourages us to think that if we have suffered we are owed. The logic of the Gospel says by contrast, “I’ve suffered, therefore I owe others, those victims of suffering who have suffered similarly, to reach out to them, to join in solidarity with them. Not “I’ve suffered, therefore I’m owed” but “I’ve suffered therefore I’m called” as Christ was called through his suffering. I am called because I am uniquely positioned, to know only too well, what helps someone in such a plight, and what doesn’t. Too often in the face of the suffering of another we can ourselves feel helpless, powerless to know what to do, even what to say to console them. Victims of suffering need the company of their fellow sufferers.

In fact the word compassion comes from the Latin to “suffer with” In the last years of his papacy John Paul II led the church largely through his suffering. In his early years he was a symbol of strength and vitality against a moribund communist state. In his last years he had become a symbol of the slow but relentless diminishment that is the dark shadow of the bright promise of modern medicine. But he was no less effective in his service to the church. His solidarity with the elderly and the infirm who suffer similarly only enhanced his leadership.

In today's Gospel Jesus tries to explain this to his disciples who can't help but want to be top dog. He tries to get it through their heads that true power is exercised by empowering others. Indeed that it is in serving the needs of others, that we find our own needs met.

Its the same insight that animates group therapy. Whether it be Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, the dynamic is the same. Healing is found by meeting with fellow-sufferers. Not by wallowing in our common pain, or by whining about what we are owed, but by learning from one another what our suffering means and what our suffering is calling us to. As Jesus liked to say-- its often easier to see the mote in another's eye than the beam in one's own. In listening to another's story of suffering I may better see the vicious spirals that I too can all too often fall into--the self-destructive fury, the self-inflicted fears, the paralyzing shame, the grandiose sense of outrage, that ultimately serve only to feed the pain, to widen its circle and fuel its cycle. In recognizing the vicious spirals that feed other's pain, I can hope to catch myself unawares in my own and convert, turn the misery around to the service of others.

"How can I find God?" A friend of mine Jim Martin, who wrote the Jesuit's Guide to Almost Everything, compiled another book of responses to this question from the famous and the not-so-famous. I'd would like to close by sharing with you the opening response of a Jewish Rabbi:

"Find God by becoming a partner with God, in healing, repairing and transforming the world. Don't look for God, but become Her ally and She will find you."