

# Twentyfourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Redemptive Suffering

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I used to think that Christianity was about saving us from shame and suffering. I have since come to learn that the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ saves us through our shame and suffering. Shame is a curse. Suffering is an evil. But shame and suffering can also school us in the virtues. For they remind us only too graphically of our belonging with others, our being but one part of the world around us. Shame and suffering forces us to recognize that we are not self-sufficient, but rather made for others, that we are creatures of this earth. Shame and suffering teaches us that salvation lies ultimately not in what we do for God, but in what God does for us and with us, through us and in us.

The first reading describes the plight of a scapegoat. Someone who is shamed that others might feel better about themselves, someone who is blamed so others can remain free of any blame for whatever has gone wrong. But Isaiah the prophet does not pile on, rather he identifies with the scapegoat. The Spirit of God champions the scapegoat. God's Holy Spirit is his advocate. And so however bruised, our scapegoat does not break. He does not identify with the shame and blame being projected upon him, he keeps faith in the one who keeps faith with him. He keeps faith in his God who saves, even from this.

In the Gospel Jesus predicts that he shall suffer from that very same kind of pain and scapegoating Isaiah describes. And it is more than Peter can handle. Peter criticizes his Lord for indulging in such dark fears. Having just professed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah he cannot conceive of Jesus ending up humiliated, nailed to a cross. Jesus deserves to be praised, not shamed. Jesus is to become the name above all other names, not a term of reproach. But Peter has much to learn. And the vehemence with which Jesus responds to him suggests that Jesus may still be learning too, that Jesus himself may not yet be altogether at peace with what awaits him. Jesus will be glorified, but it will be through first undergoing shame and suffering.

"Get out of my sight, Satan! You are not judging by God's standards but by man's." The words are addressed to Peter, but I like to think that they are also

addressed to Jesus' own fears, fears that reaches their climax in the Garden of Gethsemane where he pleads with the Father to take this cup of suffering away from him. I like to think that even Jesus does not embrace shame and suffering with equanimity. That even he recoils at becoming a scapegoat. How could he be fully human if he did not? But, as he closes his pleading at Gethsamane with the words, "not my will but thine be done" so here he rebukes Peter for judging according to human standards rather than God's. Jesus does not want to suffer, but he is prepared to suffer if that is what it takes.

The saving power of shame and suffering is one of the central paradoxes of our faith. So too a vision of heaven filled with scapegoats, filled with those our society sweeps aside when it cleans its streets. When we think of a perfect city, we do not people it with the poor and the vulnerable, with the deformed and the deranged. Rather our first thought is a city without cripples, a city without the sick and the vulnerable. But what kind of a city is that? Its not the kind of place I could imagine as home, for I know I am not perfect, or if miraculously made perfect, I know only too well that I would not likely stay that way.

Shame is a curse. Suffering is an evil. Even more that the pain it brings, it can lead to us lose faith in ourselves, lose respect for our selves and so turn our world into a wasteland. But like any evil, through the power of the Gospel shame and suffering can also be redeemed. In following Jesus, our shame and suffering can become a powerful schooling in compassion. Who better to have by your side in your own hour of pain and humiliation than one who knows what it is like by having been similarly afflicted themselves? Only those once sick knows what its like to be sick. Only a scapegoat knows what its like to be a scapegoat. Only if Jesus becomes a scapegoat can he understand us when we are shamed and humiliated. Even when we feel we deserve it, Jesus can reconcile, restore, redeem us from our curse. And so though we may feel we can do nothing to relieve our neighbor's shame and suffering, we know from our own experience, that even our mere presence can act as a healing balm. And in so responding to the shame and suffering of others, our own shame and suffering finds meaning. As James notes today, it is through putting our faith into practice that we discover its true value.

The danger in suffering is that we withdraw and turn in upon ourselves, that we surrender our dreams and give up on ourselves. The Gospel is a

proclamation of hope in the midst of such temptations to despair. Such hope is spread precisely in the turn away from ourselves and towards our neighbor in need. As Jesus rather graphically puts it, to be his disciple, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow in his footsteps. We find that as we turn our concern to the needs of our neighbor, we begin to forget ourselves, and our own burden lightens. In acts of compassion we thus not only comfort our neighbor, we relieve our own suffering as well.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples. He addresses the same question to each of us. And in our response to his question we will find the answer to our own.