

Love That Comes from the Heart
(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

3/17/24
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From Childishness to Maturity

What's the difference between being immature and being *truly* grown up? That's a question that today's reading from Jeremiah helps us think about. And taken together, today's readings show us what it is that leads a person from being one to being the other. They point to the journey that must take place. And that journey has everything to do with the purpose of Lent.

An immature person sees rules as something outside of himself or herself, sort of the way it would feel if you were being followed by a policeman who was determined to catch you doing something wrong. Your first impulse would be to try to lose him in a crowd; find some way to shake him off. The rules are like eyes, constantly watching you!

Have you ever noticed how some drivers will flash their lights at you to let you know there is a police car around the corner, so that you don't get caught speeding. Helping other people to not get caught doing something wrong seems like a nice gesture. On the other hand, if you are breaking the law, it seems to me that you should get caught.

An immature person doesn't yet feel compelled by any inner reason to be obedient. Break a rule here, break a rule there. So what? There is no inner voice holding him to account. The important thing, is giving the outward appearance of doing the right thing in order avoid getting caught.

On the other hand, someone who has truly grown up no longer sees rules as something outside themselves. Experience has taught them why the rules are good for them; it has taught them about the disasters that good rules prevent and the good outcomes they point toward. And in the process, the rules have become a part of who they are at the deepest level. In other words, the rules have been "written on their hearts".

And in this morning's readings, we are not just talking about any set of rules. We are talking about those divinely inspired laws that have been given to us by God who loves us and who created them for us, so that we can live from the fullness of his grace. We are talking about caring for our neighbors as we do for ourselves, respecting our parents, not speaking falsely about others and so on.

The person who is truly a grown up freely chooses to follow these divine laws, because they are written on his (or her) heart with a pen

that have been dipped in an inkwell of truth and beauty that inspires his devotion. The mature person feels that living in accordance with these laws is the best expression of his truest self.

The Path to Maturity: Acknowledging the Suffering

But there is a journey and a transformation that must take place between childishness and maturity. It is a learning process that we become part of when we follow and imitate Jesus as he takes up his cross. And the Jesus, we focus on is the one who, in our reading from Hebrews, “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death...”

In other words, Jesus turned to God in response to life experiences that were steeped in suffering; and his turning to God in response to that suffering, perfected him and made him the touchstone of our salvation.

Redemptive Suffering

One of the essential teachings of the Bible is that we should have faith in what we call “redemptive suffering”. It is a strange and paradoxical teaching, because there is nothing good or desirable about suffering in itself. No-one should want to suffer or wish to see anyone else suffer.

But at the same time, the Bible teaches us that knowing what it is like to suffer, from personal experience, is necessary in order to be made whole. And experiencing suffering also means that we must confront it and even explore it. That is the point that will be driven home after the resurrection, when Jesus invites Doubting Thomas to put a finger into his side and explore his wound.

The importance of experiencing suffering is already present in the passage from Jeremiah, where the literal translation of the words “I will write my words on their hearts” is “I will cut my words into their hearts.”

When Jeremiah speaks of writing words on our hearts, he is not talking about God writing in pretty penmanship with a pen that barely scratches the surface of our hearts. He is talking more along the lines of chipping letters into the surface of tablets of stone, as would be the case with the lettering of the Ten Commandments. But in this case, we are talking about cutting those letters into the soft tissue of our hearts.

In other words, Jeremiah is talking about writing in letters made from painful gashes into the flesh of our hearts; gashes that cause bleeding and pain. It is a pain so great that it leads us to the point of a death from which only God can raise us.

What is this suffering by which God cuts his law on our hearts; this suffering that smothers us, burying us in the dark earth out of which only God can raise us? It is the suffering that we see around us when others or we ourselves are unjustly persecuted.

Every time we see someone abusing or taking advantage of another person, it is like a cut to the heart, so that our hearts bleed for them. Our hearts bleed for them, because we know how it feels. In other words, we experience compassion; a connection with the others in their suffering that is not available to us until we too have suffered.

When we think of how the bully in the playground made us feel, or we see a friend struggling on a hospital bed or when we stand before the casket of someone we have dearly loved or when we hear of the terrible suffering being inflicted by human beings on each other in far places and our own failure to respond; any time we allow ourselves to truly feel the impact of a tragedy or loss that we could not turn away from, it is like a cut to the heart.

And so we cry out with Christ, "No more! No more!" And finally, when we have no place left to run and hide, we turn to God and find

ourselves praying, “O God, what can I do to end the misery created by human hands?”

The Critical Decision

So, it seems that acknowledging our suffering and our brokenness before God is part of the journey from immaturity to maturity. It is part of what we have to relearn and reexperience each Lent.

It also seems to me that there is a fork in the road that is presented to us during Lent. Each fork represents a different response to suffering. And the one we choose makes a big difference to our outcome.

Indifference

One of the forks in the road is the path of indifference. It is where we head in the opposite direction from all suffering. And we do this by escaping into distractions that can drown out the suffering around us. It’s a self-defense mechanism that we all engage in, by which to shut out the horror we feel when, for example, we hear the naked screams and sobs of a woman on the television over the mangled bodies of her children, killed in a bomb blast.

We know we can never get used to the horror of that sound or to the sheer evil that it represents. And so we turn up the volume on anything

that will drown it out and give us the space to cling to the kinder gentler vision of the world we long for. And when we turn to our distractions, the sounds of the suffering grow more muffled until we no longer hear them and can forget. In this way, we slowly build a wall around our hearts; what the Bible calls hard heartedness.

The surface of our hearts become like the hardened soil on which the sower throws his seed, but the seed bounces off the hard earth and the birds come and eat them, before they can sprout.

Vengeance

A second fork in the road that comes to my mind as a response to suffering is vengeance. Some say that our media is a rage machine that manufactures anger, because stories that provoke anger and a feed our desire for vengeance sell better than do stories about good things that happen. I think that is true.

It is also true that the terrible deeds being done need to be called out and exposed. There are many things for which anger is appropriate and that require a response. But the example of Jesus reveals that the way we respond to these things that justifiably anger us is critical. If we are truly his followers, we cannot take the path of vengeance.

We know that Jesus got angry. He expressed anger on many occasions and even overturned the tables of the money changers in a moment of anger.

However, there are no examples of Jesus behaving vengefully toward other people. He refused to allow his followers to engage in violence in the garden, even as he was being unjustly arrested. And his objective in every encounter with others was never to punish or destroy them. Whenever Jesus faced wrong-doers, his was always seeking to save them.

Redemptive Suffering

It seems to me that preventing ourselves from giving in to the desire to exact revenge, is a particularly difficult kind of suffering that we are called to endure on behalf of Jesus. It is a particularly difficult *cross* to bear, because there is nothing that seems sweeter than the prospect of revenge, when we have been wronged.

But denying ourselves the pleasure that is associated with striking back and taking “an eye for an eye”, is a form of suffering that Jesus models and calls us to embody. This is the kind of self-control and suffering that separates true grown-ups from those who are grow older, but remain childish.

When I look at my own life as a parent, it occurs to me that there were many times when I was deeply angered by the behaviors and attitudes of my son; and very often rightfully so. And I know that there are times when I gave in to the temptation to lash out at him with my tongue in ways that had more to do with satisfying my own desire to punish him, than with his actual need, which was to have a father capable of demonstrating self-control.

And then there are times when I held my tongue and denied myself the pleasure of giving him a tongue lashing, because somehow I was able to hear God telling me that what I was about to do had no good purpose. Those moments when I swallowed my pain are the ones I'm most proud of. Because I think they are moments that saved our relationship. They were moments of redemptive suffering, because I loved him too much to give in to the pleasure of yelling at him, when what he needed was a grown up.

I think that family experiences like these pretty much apply to all of our life situations. The good that we want to see in the world depends on our determination to be self-controlled and to suffer for the right reasons and to embrace that suffering as part of what it means to truly love others. It is one of the ways God cuts his law into our hearts - in

the shape of a cross; it is a wound both terrible and holy, it is the sword that pierced the heart of Mary.

“Grown up” sounds like such an ordinary word. It doesn’t capture at all what an amazing thing it is to have travelled this path of life as we have; informed by our Christian faith; to know what it is like to carry the pain of life’s wounds in your heart and to know that through those wounds, God has touched us with the greatest gift of all; the gift of his love.