

Suffer – September 16, 2018

In the story we just heard, Mark has Jesus cryptically explaining to his disciples why he could cure the child and they could not. “Only through prayer” ??? Presumably the disciples had been praying – praying their kippas off – but to no avail. If we were to describe the meaning of prayer, we might consider it as an offering of our truest self in thought, word and deed. Jesus’ true self is different from ours. Jesus is pure; we are not. So our offering will never be perfect, but, in any situation, we can try to make ourselves – to the best of our ability -- part of the solution, not the problem. And we may do some good. Knowing this is not only faith, it is also wisdom; the wisdom of the ages.

Wisdom places a high value on one’s ability to reason. But reason is not the only human faculty that knows. The heart has its reasons and its own knowledge as well. It is in this sense that Christian knowledge is always something more than belief, something more than what the intellect can affirm. the heart has its reasons the mind cannot fathom.

Since Yom Kippur is coming up on Wednesday, it wouldn’t hurt us to consider – in fact it would help us -- to consider the Jewish perspective on this subject of selflessness and wisdom. But first a romp through Webster’s Dictionary (or the OED if you prefer.)

Where we find the verb,
suffer; 3rd person present: suffers; past tense: suffered; past participle: suffered; gerund or present participle: suffering.

Definition 1A: Experience or be subjected to something bad or unpleasant. (In the years after the '29 crash the losses people suffered were inestimable)

Definition 1B: Be affected by or subject to, as in an illness or ailment. (I suffer from the rheumatism.) Ok, similar.

Definition 1C: Become or appear worse in quality. (The team itself suffered when she broke her thumb and had to sit out the rest of the season.) Reputation, Trust Level, Product Consistency

Definition 1D: (*archaic*) undergo martyrdom or execution. Ok, oww.

Definition 2A: (*archaic*) tolerate. ("The people will no longer suffer the existing government)

And finally Definition 2: which is listed as *dated*) tolerate, allow someone to do something. Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

In our Hebrew Bible reading from Isaiah, the prophet talks about a figure known as "the suffering servant." Christian tradition assumes that Isaiah was talking about Jesus. The text also implies that each of us can become a suffering servant ourselves, in our lifetimes. There may well be plenty 1A,B,C or even D-definition suffering along the way too, illness, crime, loss, and failure, suffer by allowing others room to grow into relationship with us is our primary objective.

When Jesus says pick up your cross, it doesn't mean he wants anyone else to be crucified, let alone all of us. Our cross is

simply whatever life hands us. Suffering means picking it up by fully engaging with whatever we encounter in life, by allowing life to happen. God will be with us and strengthen us as long as we engage the world by means of love; God will be with us and strengthen us when our suffering is painful; God will be with us too when our government is insufferable.

The Jewish perspective also includes a beautiful concept *baalat teshuvah*; which translates literally as “master of returning.” The singular form is *baal*. Traditionally, the term *baal teshuvah* meant someone who had done wrong, regretted the behavior, and then turned their life around, resolving never to do the same again; they returned to a better life.

But in the widest, most definitive sense, a *baalat teshuvah* is anyone who is in a constant state of return to her essential true self, an inner soul that connects to the divine through learning, worship and doing mitzvahs. In this sense, every person is capable of being a *baal teshuvah* and should strive to be one. God is infinite, and the journey towards God endless. But as long as we are traveling in the right direction, we are already bound up with that infiniteness. Yom Kippur is the great Day of Atonement, just as Lent is the great Season of Self-examination, but these states must be continuous. If we are to follow Wisdom, every day is Yom Kippur; every season is Lenten, just as every day can be joyful and every season blissful(one way or another).

Thus we come to understand the inseparability of worship and discipleship, of theology and ethics., of faith and life. Worship and discipleship are distinct, but they are also inseparable. Wisdom has long told us that how one lives in relation to God is inseparable from how one lives with one’s neighbor: ‘Hallowed Be,’ ‘Kingdom Come,’ and ‘Will be Done’ are

inseparable from bread, forgiveness, and the strength to resist temptation.

How we become a *baalat teshuvah* is by allowing our lives to be lived in charity to the best of our ability. Perhaps it is impossible for anyone to seek God, but it is inarguable that God is seeking to bestow unlimited life upon each of us, by giving us this precept: "Do not do anything to anyone else you wouldn't want them to do to you." The gospel teaches that we are not the ones who know, but the ones who are known. And whatever we do know comes from the experience of being known by someone other than ourself.

Back from the monastery, a man decided to visit his friend the parish priest, to talk about his experience. The hour was late. He knocked on the door, and a voice responded, "Who is it?" "It is I," replies the man, sure that his own pastor will know him. The Rabbi knew him all right, he responded, "God alone has the right to say I. Earth is too small to contain two I's. Didn't you learn that in the monastery?"

The man knew his friend was right; he returned to the monastery that same night. The next day, the man sat there listening while an old monk answered the Oblates' curious questions. Though he was usually shy, the man felt so comfortable in the old monk's presence that he found himself raising his hand. "Father, could you tell us a little about yourself?" The monk leaned back, "Myself? Hmmm." There was a long pause. "My name used to be 'Me,' but now it's 'You.'

Christ will live in us as we open the door and invite him in, in the form of our neighbor. The issue is in letting this power move in, to change us and make us willing. Having Christ dwell in our

hearts is like having a new person move into your household. If they're just visiting, it's easy. You simply offer hospitality and try to practice good manners. But if someone moves in, everything changes. At first you might try to hold onto your familiar patterns and routines, but eventually they will make their mark.

Wisdom of heart; wisdom of mind; wisdom of body. Wisdom is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the thought of God, an image of cosmic goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things. In every generation, she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets. She is as beautiful as the sun and every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light of day she is found to be superior, for the day is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil will never prevail. Nothing will ever succeed Wisdom.

Remember that the true pilgrimage walk is across the undiscovered land of your own heart and imagination, which cannot be explored any other way than through intention, with gratitude in your knapsack and compassion for all you see as your staff
