

A Christian View of Human Suffering

May 7, 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

By Grattan Brown

Readings: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 2:20b-25;
John 10:1-10

If we live the kind of love for which God created us, we eventually experience suffering. Even if we fall short of living this kind of love, or hardly try to live it, we still experience suffering. Suffering is universal, and everyone develops a way of responding to it. Indeed, the experience of suffering and the need to respond to it unite Christians with people of every other religious faith and with those of no religious faith at all.

The Church's teaching about suffering witnesses to the gospel and is intended to help the faithful imitate Christ's response to suffering. This teaching should speak to the very foundations of religious faith precisely because suffering makes believers question God's supreme power and love for humanity, and even God's very existence. If God exists and is all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful, and personally involved in our lives, then surely God recognizes our suffering and lovingly desires to end it. Why, then, do we ever experience it?

A Problem to Solve and a Mystery to Accept

If the gospel reveals God's loving plan for humanity, then it too must offer some answer to this question. Before exploring what the scriptures for the Fourth Sunday of Easter reveal about suffering, spend some time reflecting philosophically on suffering. It is clearly an evil to be avoided, but it is nonetheless accepted under certain circumstances in order to bring about some good. We confront this paradox as we encounter suffering, and we discover reasons for accepting it, often in pursuit of some good we cannot bring about without a struggle. The more we recognize the meanings that suffering may have, the more we go on the lookout for the good we can accomplish, and the less we focus on the suffering we fear.

For example, consider an analogy between suffering and the rigors of elite athletic training. By the time elite athletes achieve high performance, they have confronted physical and psychological challenges during thousands of training hours. Of course, they have willingly endured these challenges to develop the greatest skill that they are personally capable of achieving. Confronting suffering that we do *not* choose, or even that others inflict upon us, both raises the fear that ongoing, uncontrolled suffering will overwhelm us and also provokes our sense of injustice. In such cases it is even more challenging to discern what good might come from suffering.

When we look for the causes of suffering and for ways to eliminate it, we treat suffering as a problem to be solved. This positive response to suffering inspires many cultural and professional practices, such as medicine and social justice ministry. When we look for meaning in suffering, especially the suffering we cannot eliminate, we still treat suffering as a problem to be solved. Yet none of the greatest saints and thinkers have given a completely satisfying explanation of the meaning of suffering. For this reason, some people conclude that suffering is without meaning, while others conclude that suffering possesses a meaning that in some ways surpasses human understanding and is a mystery.

Viewing our encounter with suffering as both a problem to be solved and a mystery to be accepted leads us toward wisdom about the meaning of suffering and fruitful responses to its manifestations. The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter reveal how Jesus's incarnation, divinity, and messianic identity demonstrate the redemptive meaning of ordinary human suffering and encourage wise discernment of worthy from unworthy suffering.

Peter's Speech

Peter's speech at Pentecost forces a huge crowd of "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" to consider that they have failed God, the worst human suffering. They are "cut to the heart" as they realize they had crucified their "Lord and Messiah." What does Peter say that leads them to this realization? He explains how Jesus is their "Lord," God himself become flesh, and savior, "Messiah," the promised one of Israel. In this way, he provokes in them the terrible remorse that any of us feel when, wittingly or unwittingly, our actions destroy what we love.

Those in the crowd failed as much from their own dull wit as from their sinfulness. They are "cut to the heart" when Peter shows them the many signs, which they missed, that Jesus is Lord and Messiah: Jesus' mighty deeds and words, his resurrection and appearances, and his fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies they held dear. They feel remorse at their own lack of attention to the One who most cares for them and how this inattention led to Jesus's death.

They suffer not only from their own dull wit, but also from their sins and from the corruption in the culture around them. When the crowd asks Peter how to respond to this remorse, Peter says, "Repent and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins." And then: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." By repenting, people recognize concretely the evil in their actions, "your sins," and culture, "this corrupt generation."

Accepting baptism cleanses them of sin and instructs them through grace about the way to follow Jesus. This way of following Jesus inevitably subjects the Christian to various kinds of suffering, especially that kind imposed by people who dislike those who reject sinful actions and tendencies in the culture.

Suffering for Doing What Is Good

The second reading teaches about a redemptive meaning of suffering that reflects the fundamental paradox mentioned above: not only is suffering an evil to be avoided and thus a problem to be solved, but suffering also has a meaning and is thus a mystery to be contemplated for wisdom. 1 Peter 2:21 may appear to teach that Christ calls his followers to suffer as if *suffering itself* were good: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps." But 2:20-21 really teaches that suffering precisely "for doing what is good" reveals the meaning of suffering, while being "beaten for doing wrong" obscures it.

1 Peter 2:22-25 teaches about several goods that come from suffering: redemption from sin, entrusting oneself to others, and developing right judgment and self-control in the midst of suffering. Peter explains that "Christ suffered for you" and "bore our sins in his body," and thus recalls the central meaning of his crucifixion: the forgiveness of sins. Verse 22 demonstrates Christ's response to one of the worst kinds of suffering involved in the crucifixion: suffering evil deliberately inflicted by the wicked upon the innocent. The person who, like Christ, neither insults nor threatens, nor pretends to be worthy of evil treatment, displays great self-control. This exceptional ability for self-control is developed gradually by responding charitably to ordinary daily suffering and through practices like fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Rather than strike back in anger, Christ hands himself over "to the one who judges justly" and shows us how to entrust ourselves to the care of others while seeking right judgment and a life lived "for righteousness."

Suffering and Wisdom

The gospel reading helps us see that accepting redemptive suffering leads to wisdom. In this story, John the Evangelist recalls Christ's comparing himself to a shepherd, the faithful to sheep, and false teachers to "thieves and robbers" who enter the sheepfold, the Church, to rob us of the salvation and wisdom offered by Christ. We acquire this wisdom by following Christ, including in his example of suffering. False teachers attempt to sound like Christ while obscuring the truth, including the truth about the meaning of suffering.

These false teachers are rightly called "thieves and robbers," for stealing is an act of acquiring something valuable by taking rather than producing or trading. Thieves avoid the effort and challenge of acquiring property, and therefore this story rightly shows them "climbing over elsewhere" instead of entering through the gate of the sheepfold.

By contrast, Christ leads the sheep through the gate, which represents the effort, challenge, and indeed the suffering involved in living the gospel. We learn to recognize Jesus's voice by making a righteous response to suffering and in that way recognizing its various meanings.

Many kinds of sinful action represent foolish and even wicked attempts to avoid suffering. One of the clearest examples is euthanasia, which is the causing of death in order to eliminate suffering. But the gospel teaches Christians to accompany rather than kill patients, who might request euthanasia because they feel lonely, useless, and in despair of comfort. Another example is abortion, which women often seek because others reject rather than accept their children. Less clear but no less important are situations in which people use advantages in wealth and power to avoid contributing to their society and even to exploit those in less advantageous social positions.

We seek practical solutions to eliminate suffering even as we gradually recognize meanings in suffering by imitating Christ and contemplating the gospel. Even so, suffering is also a mystery that surpasses our understanding. Our practical ways of eliminating suffering can reflect the meanings and mystery we recognize about suffering. Some of our cultural practices, however, reflect little interest in these meanings and mystery. Many people today have lost their sense of sin, and we might compare them to the devout Jews of Jerusalem whom St. Peter "cut to the heart" by showing them Jesus's true identity. But in the end, those with Peter realized that following Jesus would satisfy their desire for a fulfilling life, and they repented and accepted baptism. Following Christ gradually shifts our view from the fear of suffering to the good that one can accomplish by accepting it, especially the good of salvation by the forgiveness of sins.

About the Author

Grattan Brown is chair of the theology department and associate professor of theology at Belmont Abbey College.

FOR FURTHER READING

Mother Angelica, "The Value of Suffering"

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, [Iura et Bona: Declaration on Euthanasia](#)

Sabrina Arena Ferrisi, "Making Sense of Suffering"

Philip Johnson, "Dear Brittany: Our Lives Are Worth Living, Even With Brain Cancer"

Matthew Levering, [On Christian Dying](#)

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Suffering is clearly an evil to be avoided, but it is nonetheless accepted under certain circumstances in order to bring about some good.***
- ***Seeing our suffering as both a problem to be solved and a mystery to be accepted leads us toward wisdom about the meaning of suffering and fruitful responses to it.***
- ***The person who, like Christ, neither insults nor threatens nor pretends to be worthy of evil treatment displays great self-control.***
- ***Self-control is developed gradually by responding charitably to ordinary daily suffering and through practices like fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.***
- ***Christ leads the sheep through the gate, which represents the effort, challenge, and indeed the suffering involved in living the gospel.***

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