

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: When in Rome

Sermon: Suffering and Joy on the Scales of Life

Romans 8:18-19

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters.

Revelation 21:4

'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

Psalms 30:5

Sing praise to the Lord, you saints of His,
And give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name.
For His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for life;
Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy comes in the morning.

Sermon

In the middle of this summer, we had to bury out 21 year old cat. It was a sad day at the Benischek house, this cat had been a part of our kids lives since they were born. She didn't die of old age, but she got into it with a racoon or possum in our back yard in the evening hours when we weren't home, she went out in a blaze of glory. The next morning as we buried her, one of the kids remarked that she was in a better place. Fast forward a couple months, and one kiddo asked the astute question, if heaven is a better place, why bother with earth at all? Why not just go there now? The question was a thought exercise, not an appeal to start packing the spiritual bags right here and now. It would seem that our task is to suffer here on earth before the joys of eternity.

Suffering and joy are interrelated. It's hard to know what light is without knowing the dark. It's hard to describe heat without the knowledge of cold. It's hard to understand hunger if you're always full. It's difficult to appreciate joy without walking a road of suffering sometime in your life.

You people. You people know something about the sufferings of this present time. You know them rather intimately and you'd really rather not. Suffering, particularly the suffering of those we love, has a way of consuming all our vision. Today, St. Paul gives us a different way of thinking about suffering. You see, he holds all the pain and sorrow of this life up against the glory that waits for us. And he finds that the sufferings are simply outweighed. "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). So Paul writes to the Romans to help them stand in this painful moment looking forward to the final revealing of God's Son. And his words come to us to help us stand here today. In Christ, we have been made into the children of God.

The longer I walk with Jesus, the more I see that sufferers often have secret access to happiness. I used to think Satan loved suffering, that it was his weapon of choice against our faith. They tried that with Job, right? Make Job suffer, and he'll lose his faith in God. But while the evil one certainly (and viciously) tries to make the most

of it, I now suspect Satan secretly hates suffering. He's simply seen it draw too many people closer to Christ. He has watched, for thousands of years, while God has taken all that he meant for terrible evil and worked it for undeniable good (Genesis 50:20).

That's one reason I love reading the stories in the Bible, people who endured in spite of their circumstances. King David was driven from his home by betrayal and mutiny, his own son got an army and was chasing after dear old dad, David running for his life in the desert, and yet he could write,

My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night. (Psalm 63:5–6)

David knew suffering. Hunger, pain, betrayal, he witnessed the death of more than one of his children. But for all of his trials, no author in the Bible speaks more about joy than him. He crafted the majority of the language we use about our happiness in God, and yet, he spent much of his life running from people who wanted to kill him. If we look closely enough at his suffering and hope, his sorrow and joy, we will find comfort for our wilderness — for the days, or weeks, or even years God carries us through pain, weakness, loss, or suffering. The late great Ray Charles said it like this: "Let's face it, you can do more with sad songs than with joyful songs. You can do more with grief because everybody has it." But it also means that we have a great opportunity to find joy as well.

So how do you find the joy that's yet to come and beat this suffering bit? Here is just a sampling of ideas: First, change your body. The body, mind and spirit are all connected, right? Change the body. Treat it right. Go for a walk. Exercise promotes chemicals in the brain that improve your mood and make you more relaxed. Specifically, the brain releases feel-good chemicals called endorphins throughout the body. Physical activity reduces anxiety and depressed mood, and enhances self-esteem. Boosts energy and brainpower.

Check your thankfulness meter. Someone once said that it's physically impossible to be angry and grateful at the same time. Gratitude cuts off the fuel of suffering. The next time you're angry, sad, anxious, frustrated or stressed focus on one thing you're grateful for in your life. It could be your significant other, your dog, your friends, your parents or anything else. According to Psychology Today, shifting your focus to something you love, appreciate will:

- Open the door to more relationships
- Improve your physical health
- Improve your psychological health
- Enhance empathy and reduces aggression
- Help you sleep better.
- Improve your self-esteem
- Increase your mental strength.

Practicing gratitude on a regular basis will get to focus on the abundance in life, not the lack of that is bringing your negative thoughts (and suffering).

Find a Way to Give Back and Contribute

It's easy to forget how others live around the world. Less than 1% of people in the world earn over \$100,000 annually. Yes, six-figures means you earn more than 99% of the 7.5 billion people in the world. Less than one family in 5 have a car. 30% of the world's population does not have access to clean drinking water. If you're

feeling down and sorry for yourself go out and help someone else because there are plenty of people that are doing much worse than you. It'll be a quick reminder that life is glorious and that you have so much you can appreciate. Not only will volunteering help you but you will help others. Buy someone a cup of coffee. Tip someone way more than you normally would. Hold the door open for a group of people. Be nice to random strangers. If you're suffering you are focusing on YOU. Most of the joy in life is focusing on OTHERS.

In closing, just a word. Paul shared that the joys coming outweigh the pain of today. He wasn't talking about heaven, at least as we know it. He was talking about the joy of the kingdom of God as we create it here on earth. In this life, not the next. Is heaven great? I'm sure it is, but don't short circuit the process by trying to get there early. We can find joy in this world, past the sufferings we face. And the joys do outweigh the bad. It's just hard to see that when you're stuck in the bad.

But take solace in the bible stories, of pain and discomfort, and perseverance and joys yet to come. What's the point of living? Living. And finding joy in the blessings of each new day - even the hard ones. Weeping can last through the night, but joy comes with the morning. And the family of God said, AMEN.

Opening:

Hello Oregon City UMC! It is great to see you today. 27 weeks of online worship, we are at the 6th month mark now, half a year. As we celebrate our 180th year this year, it has been a unique year in the life of our church. We've faced fire, flood, wars, pandemics before. In our 6th building, fourth location. We have seen a lot in our history. Although this is a new one for us. But we are still the church, gathering together, albeit remotely. Thank you for joining us today, and here are our morning announcements. With a little bit of technology, here's a four part hymn from our tradition, Be Still My Soul.

Offertory:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, why can't we always be on vacation? Resting when we wish, swimming when we wish. Why can't we go on long walks every day just for the sheer pleasure of being immersed in the wonder of nature? Why can't we all be endowed every day with good health and a spirit of peace? Why can't work always be upbeat and successful? What's so wrong with a continuous diet of beauty, victory, and laughter?

Whatever our wishes for life may be, Lord, our experience reveals that there is also fear, struggle, pain, hard work, and defeat. Strange as it seems, when we look back across our lives, the times when we met adversity head-on provide us with the greater satisfaction, while the times of fun and laughter are harder to recall. Something about victory hard won endures.

We resist saying, "Thank you, God, our Creator" for our suffering, but we can say, "Thank You," for being healed. It is most difficult to say, "Thank You," for those times when life falls apart, but we can say, "Thank You," for a hope that rises above disaster. We fight against saying, "Thank You," when we have been discarded, but we say, "Thank You," for your love that always includes us. Thank you, God, for being with us in the "real" world. These words we bring to you through the Holy Spirit in the words that He taught,

Closing:

Paul closes out II Corinthians with this: Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.