

Third Sunday in Lent (A/RCL)
February 27, 2005
Romans 5.1-11
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

The cover story of the current issue of *Newsweek* is entitled “‘Precious’ Suffering.” It is about Pope John Paul II’s attitude toward the infirmity that Parkinson’s disease has brought upon him. The athletic man who was still shushing down ski slopes in his sixties is now barely able to walk or speak.

A reporter present at a recent papal audience wrote:

The [pope’s] voice quavers, just a few words breathed with excruciating effort, audible over loudspeakers, but only barely comprehensible. Few people can get close enough to Pope John Paul II to try to read the thoughts behind the mask of sickness on a Sunday morning, but some of those who have approached him say they’ve glimpsed the pain of a man with a vital mind, a man who has loved life enormously, trapped now in a body that brings him nothing but suffering. “You can see it in his eyes,” says [one] priest. “To be imprisoned like this must cause him tremendous agony.”

And yet – because he is the leader of a billion Roman Catholics; because he is the first pontiff of the satellite and Internet age, reaching out to billions more, and because he is John Paul II, who has ruled the church for more than 26 years – in that public experience of suffering lies enormous power. And he knows it. More than 20 years ago, after recovering from the pistol shot that almost took his life in front of St. Peter’s, John Paul declared that suffering... is one of the most powerful messages in Christianity... In 1994, as age and infirmity began to incapacitate John Paul publicly, he told his followers he had heard God and was about to change the way he led the church. “I must lead her with suffering,” he said. “The pope must suffer so that every family and the world should see that there is, I would say, a higher gospel: the gospel of suffering, with which one must prepare the future.”

The idea is, **look at the Pope suffering** obediently, patiently, prayerfully, graciously and **see Christ suffering** in love for us. When I lived in Chicagoland, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin was diagnosed with a brain tumor and also made **his** illness and

suffering a witness to the love and life of Jesus poured out on the cross. I moved back East and John Cardinal O'Connor of the Archdiocese of New York offered **his** sickness and suffering as a powerful act of ministry, a final witness of faith in our crucified and risen Lord. It's a similar dynamic to John the Baptist catching people's attention so he can direct them away from himself and toward the Lamb of God. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). "Look at me and see – **Christ.**"

Listen to the beautiful prayer, "The Breastplate of St. Patrick," the prayer St. Patrick prayed as armor against all evil:

Christ, be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
 Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
 Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise...

As it continues, think of those who have allowed their suffering to become a witness of faith to the world, not just cardinals and popes but loved ones of yours who have also suffered **obediently, patiently, prayerfully, graciously** and thereby allowed you to **see Christ's suffering** love on the cross....

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me.
 Salvation is of the Lord.
 Salvation is of the Lord,
 Salvation is of the Christ.
 May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.

Martin Luther contrasted **the theology of glory**, which he associated with triumphalism, with faith for worldly gain, with a concern for privilege over a desire to serve, with **the theology of the cross**, loving acknowledgement and undying gratitude that we have been bought with a price, the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, freely given on

the cross. The theology of the cross says that we Christians are not members of a country club of comforts but are patients in a hospital for sin-sick and struggling human beings, under the care of the Great Physician Himself. Glory awaits us up ahead but is not our current reality.

Luther unearthed this theology of the cross in the writings of St. Paul, including and especially in his letter to the Romans. In today's epistle we heard:

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and **we boast in our hope** of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but **we also boast in our sufferings**, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Romans 5.1-5

If this were a dialogue homily in which I asked you all to catalog out loud the different forms of suffering you have experienced yourself or witnessed in others, the list would be long.... But no matter what suffering comes our way, it can be an opportunity for us to witness to the **abiding presence** and **unflagging goodness** of God.

Especially when we are passing through fire and flame that makes others wince just to stand on the sidelines and watch, we can redirect the onlookers' gaze from ourselves to our Savior. When our life circumstances make others grateful they're **not** us, we can affirm the strength that God's grace give and the heavenly hope that no earthly danger can destroy. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can make people marvel at the unshakable reality of faith, hope and love even and especially in our battered lives.

Many of you have built up my faith, hope and love, by your own faith-filled, hopeful, loving endurance of various hardships and heartaches: sickness that has come

unbidden, the untimely death of loved ones, the painful consequences of unwise actions. Regardless of the **cause** of your suffering, you have shown me the **comfort** you find in faith, the new beginnings forgiveness makes possible, the life-giving reality of Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Back to the *Newsweek* cover story. A couple weeks ago,

In a written message, the pope told the world's sick, "Your suffering is never useless... it's a precious thing." (p. 29)

We, who are called to be "little Christs," can allow our suffering, too, to point the world to our loving Christ who suffered on the cross for our salvation. Our suffering will never have the exposure that John Paul's does, but God will certainly honor our desire to witness to the love of God even in the midst of pain, to be hope-filled when we might otherwise flirt with despair, to show in deeds the faith we profess in words. Amen

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