

Pastor Roy's Sermon from February 1, 2015

Imagine with me the peasants in ancient Palestine, fearing the gods and oblivious of the workings of El, the High God of the gods. El is the silent creator God to whom the local deities answered, so to speak. Deities like Ba'al, god of the storm, and Ashtoreth, goddess of fertility. When prophets began to speak for El, or Yahweh—according to Moses—the people were confused by their allegiances to this God or that one. Which was true? Which most affected their lives? Which had the final say? The prophets delivered their messages of this high God and the people began to listen. And they did not wish to speak directly, lest they be consumed by this holy power. The people were afraid for many reasons. The peasants feared their land lords, at whose mercy they lived. Yet they must fear and respect the gods as well. They caught it from all sides. Those with means, land lords and kings, were more comfortable believing in ceremonies and rituals than a God who calls us to compassionate, meaningful relationships with the poor among them. They might lose their income! The poor were drawn to Yahweh who offered hope for daily bread and joy in their lives. The prophets preached on about justice and compassion. The people struggled to understand and worship. It was probably the exile in Babylon that cast the final vote in favor of El, Yahweh. The Palestinian gods had no power or relevance in Babylon and Persia or even when the Greeks came along when they were returned to their homeland Judea. Adonai, whose true name they stopped pronouncing long before was a God who could bring them through anything. Indeed, this true God has journeyed with the Jews to the present day.

I've gotten ahead of myself. Now imagine another person, living in the time of Jesus who is overwhelmed by an evil presence, who cannot break free. Misery at every step, piercing him with fear and hopelessness. Pushed aside by neighbors and townsfolk who were afraid to get close physically or emotionally, lest they also be consumed or their families be jeopardized. Did anyone care? Surely there was no hope for healing—he was barely able to stand in the back of the synagogue. Did anyone even care? It doesn't seem the man has the courage to ask for help. It's the fear of the demon which brings him freedom. "You've come to destroy us! We know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus silences the demon and sends it away. The world of the possessed man was similar to the world of the Palestinian peasant in the ancient days. Why talk of this Adonai/Lord God when I can't deal with my life right now?

The people said "My, what teaching with authority and power!" This Jesus is not simply rambling about clean vs. unclean, or what is right or wrong. He is giving us a life to live. He is bringing God to us. Compassion and mercy for all. And hope for the poor. If Jesus heals this outcast, than everyone matters to God. No one is beyond compassion. No one is lost.

Sadly God is often seen as a manipulator, even as a benevolent dictator. This is not helpful for growing into a mature faith. Each person healed in the Gospels and throughout the Scriptures is a sign of God's goodness. Each person matters. No one excluded from Grace. Further, we are reminded in the proclamation of the prophets and the healings of Jesus that Suffering clearly is not the plan of God. God invites all to free grace. Suffering is never a strategic tool in the hands of a loving God.

We might react, if suffering is not of God, why does God allow it to exist? A second question we might ask is, "Can you even imagine a world where suffering is not possible?" Would anything be left of it as we know it? If all chances, changes, choices are eliminated? Nothing is left. We would be watching someone else act. We would be powerless to act ourselves. There would be no opportunities, no creativity, no wind of the Spirit.

So there has to be a possibility for suffering for there to be life. But life itself is not about suffering, God is not about suffering, but about life and healing and compassionate freedom. Goodness is at the basis of

all that is. Not suffering. Suffering is what happens when something runs counter to what is needed for life to thrive. Ill health. Brokenness of body or brokenness between the parts of creation, whether human or otherwise. This is the wildness, untameness of God's gift of life. And we are part of this creation.

Despite what some believe, I do not believe that creation exists for us, or that all humans and only humans are in a grand test to see whether or not we are worthy to spend eternity with God. We are freed from fear as we get in touch with the mercy of God present in all of creation. We sense this as we share moments of joy and gladness with others. As we participate in the healing and resurrection power of God all around us.

Suffering is not a tool. Suffering is not a punishment. Suffering is temporary, as we and all of the living struggle to live into the life and love of God. God invites wholeness and healing and communion with all of life.

Suffering will not last. Life will endure in the presence and mercy of God. Life is grace. Grace is life. God is grace. We know all too well that the pain of suffering is real. Suffering can push us to the brink of despair. At this place—the place of the ancient Palestinian peasant and the demon possessed man, the place of the refugee, the childless mother, the orphan, the sick, the mentally ill, and the dying— at this place we can do no other but walk by faith, praying for strength to trust as we lean into the mercy of God. At this place of desperate faith, we fall into grace of God, the healing of Jesus, resurrection to the life of the ages in the presence of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.