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“Human Suffering and Discipleship”
A sermon by Sam Miglarese

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
June 25, 2017

Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 86; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:26-33

Hurricane Matthew is on my mind. Tyler Momsen-Hudson and Jane Williams are planning a mission trip for us to Lenoir County to areas affected by the sudden flash flooding in our state. Also Jon Abels and I are also on a Duke team preparing soon to give the Governor a \$50K check from Duke Employees for emergency assistance for the victims of all that flooding in the counties affected. Hurricane Matthew is on my mind.

I observed the hurricane’s devastation last year from a far as it wove a path of destruction from the Caribbean to the Southeast of the US. When it was downgraded to a category one, I did not give it much thought since even Duke and Carolina football played that Saturday in the heavy rain. But by the weekend there was not a single one of us who was not touched personally by the storm, the rains, and the flooding. My nephew and his family were evacuated from the flooding in Lumberton and all of us have seen the terrible human tragedy that has befallen our friends and neighbors in the flood zone. The suffering is not something we read about in some far-off place; it is something that we lived through and saw the impact on counties just southeast of us. Think Princeville!

Today's first and third readings have to do with the topic of human suffering especially the suffering of the innocent man or woman who remains faithful to the Lord, regardless of the nature or scope of that suffering.

We know that the prophet Jeremiah suffered enormously, on a deeply personal level, because of the message that God had asked him to proclaim. In today's reading he recognizes that even his closet friends had turned against him. Nonetheless, Jeremiah clings to the belief that Lord alone will not betray him. His preaching aroused fierce opposition: even the King of Israel had his prophecies burned as they were read to him (Jer. 36:20-26). Undeterred Jeremiah sends the King another scroll. In it, he cries out: "The Lord is with me like a mighty champion," and "Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for he has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the wicked." Jeremiah felt the intensity and the bitterness of the Lord's call to challenge the establishment—yet, there is resignation and trust even as he was tortured and left to die in a muddy well!

And then in today's Gospel Jesus very openly promises his followers persecution – telling them that they will have to suffer, even to the point, he says, where men and women may "deprive the body of life." But yet he reassures them of the Father's constant, steadfast love and concern. "Every hair of your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything." Talk about mixed message!

Or is it?

Might we discern in the sufferings of Jeremiah and in Jesus's paradoxical words something about the mystery of innocents who suffer, whether at the hands of friend or foe, or even the vagaries of Mother Nature?

The sufferings of Jeremiah, the sufferings Jesus promised his followers, are just as mysterious, just as seemingly irrational, as suffering inflicted by flood waters that overwhelmed Lumberton and Princeville. For friends to turn on a good man—or on us—for proclaiming or trying to live God’s word faithfully is senseless...as absurd and unreasonable as the muddy waters that poured in the homes of Princeville. But the result is exactly the same: innocent suffering, human tragedy and needless pain.

So what light can be shed on the mystery of human suffering by the words of Jeremiah and the teaching of Jesus? I see three possibilities:

- It seems that we do not suffer because we are innocent, nor because we deserve to be punished. Suffering comes to the good and the bad alike, and it can appear equally senseless to all.
- Secondly, when we ask “why”, when we look for some logical reason to explain suffering, to make it more reasonable, our effort is bound to fail. Quite simply, there is no explanation based on human logic that will satisfy our need to make sense of it all.
- Thirdly, from the perspective of faith, what is most important, when faced with suffering, is our own response, how we face into what has befallen us. That is what makes all the difference.

Jesus’ admonition to his followers was to call for continuing trust in God’s abiding love, regardless of what suffering we encounter. Jeremiah exemplified what Jesus asked of his followers. Despite all of the terrible things that befell him, the prophet’s conviction that the Lord was with him—supporting him, loving him—never wavered.

God's word today is calling us to something similar. We are called to respond in a Christian way to any and all suffering we or others undergo, whether it be from flood waters, diagnosis of life threatening disease in one we love, the tragedy of a home torn by hatred and violence, the senseless violence of terrorism.

ALL suffering is accepted as an opportunity to share in Jesus' cross, borne in love, then what begins as something that defies explanation can suddenly be infused with meaning and filled with filled with redemptive possibilities. Mere human tragedy becomes then a moment of grace, a day of salvation. Our pain is not lessened, nor can we make sense of it in human terms. But when, at its greatest intensity we cry out: "The very hairs of my head are counted...I am not afraid of anything...Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for he has rescued the life of the poor," then we give profound witness to what Christian faith looks like in its most ordinary and in its more heroic form.

Influences:

Robert D. Duggan

Michael R. Simone

The Good People of Princeville, NC

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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