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Proper 17A
Peace, Seattle
August 31, 2014
Matthew 16:21-28

SUFFERING THAT REDEEMS

Surrounded by an army of thousands with over 100 enemy ships commanding its harbor, the French port of Calais fought for its very existence.

For ten months it had managed to keep out the English by the skin of its teeth. But in the eleventh month, after repeated failed attempts to break the embargo, with food and water depleted and its citizens starving, the leaders of Calais finally lit fires signaling their readiness to surrender.[1]

Calais' governor, Jean de Vienne, sent a message to England's King Edward III promising the city's surrender if everyone in the town, soldiers and citizens alike, was given a pardon.

Edward replied that he would accept the surrender on one condition: that six of Calais' most respected citizens come out to hand over the keys to the castle and town. They must come out, he demanded, barefoot, with nooses 'round their necks, begging for mercy and ready to die.[2]

When the conditions for surrender were reported to the people, Eustache de Saint-Pierre, Calais' wealthiest and most prominent citizen, was the first to step forward, followed by five others.[3]

Emaciated and barefoot, the six walked out of Calais just as King Edward had demanded, to meet their appointed destiny.

Sculptor Auguste Rodin captures this moment, and the depth of the human condition, in his masterpiece, The Six Burghers of Calais.[4]

> "**If any want to become my followers," says Jesus, "let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."**

While self-denial was nobly embodied by those six leading citizens of Calais in 1347, self-denial is not trending high in America in the 21st century. Self-fulfillment or self-realization, maybe. But self-denial? Not so much. We pretty much want the things we want when we want them and how we want them; and are willing to pay a bit more to guarantee they'll show up on time.

But intentionally denying ourselves whatever experience or consumer item (big or small) we've got a hankering for is not one of our strong suits. And so it's not exactly a selling point when Jesus tells his friends (and us), "Deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me."

It's not that suffering doesn't happen here. We watch it unfold dramatically everyday in the lives of people who make the evening news from Seattle to Ferguson, the West Bank to Syria; and less

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[1] Craig L. Lambert, *Edward III's siege of Calais: A reappraisal.* Journal of Medieval History, Vol 37:1, 2011.
[2] http://www.calais.ws/TheBurghersOfCalais.html
[3] The others were Jean d'Aire, Jacques and Pierre de Wissant, Jean de Fiennes, and Andrieus d'Andres. In Rodin's sculpture, Eustache de Saint-Pierre - the bearded man, is the richest, oldest, and most prominent citizen of the group and the first to volunteer; Jean d'Aire - the second to volunteer, stands firmly in place, his jaw set, holding one of the keys to the city; Jacques de Wiessant - the third to volunteer, has one arm raised and stands behind Eustache de Saint-Pierre; Pierre de Wiessant - Jacques de Wiessant's younger brother and the fourth to volunteer, turns sideways toward Jean de Fiennes with one arm raised and his mouth open; Jean de Fiennes - the youngest burgher, stands with arms outstretched and mouth open; and Andrieu d'Andres - buries his head in his hands. His bent posture and enormous hands obscure his face.
[4] In Rodin's slightly larger than life work, which we were able to see recently at the Rodin museum in Paris, each condemned man approaches his fate with a different expression and posture; each has his own experience. They go together, but each inhabits his own world. http://burghers-of-calais.org/

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dramatically—though not less powerfully—in the lives of people we know. Suffering simply comes with the territory of being human.

But the suffering we witness and at times experience is something we wish to avoid—and avoid at all cost—not something we want to embrace.

In last week's gospel, Peter came off as the star pupil, the 1 out of 12 who really "got it." When Jesus asked him, WHO DO YOU SAY I AM? he answered YOU ARE THE ANOINTED ONE, THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.

But today the other shoe drops, and Peter goes from being star pupil to class fool because he didn't connect the dots between Jesus as Messiah and Jesus as Suffering servant.

And why would he want to? There's enough suffering in the lives we live already—why go out of our way to find more?

Living under the shadow of Empire, with the boots of the Roman military planted firmly on their necks, the community to which Matthew addresses his gospel knew plenty about suffering. They held on to the hope (nurtured through centuries of defeat) that one day a divinely appointed emissary would emerge to lead them out of captivity for good. This Messiah would engineer a comeback that would send the Romans packing. **Could Jesus be the one?**

When Jesus starts telling his closest friends that the path before him is going to lead to suffering, rejection, and death, of course Peter objects!

NOT MORE OF THE SAME, JESUS! HAVEN'T WE HAD ENOUGH OF THAT? GOD FORBID!

THOSE WHO WANT TO SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, Jesus replies.
AND THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT…

But what's that supposed to mean? It sounds more like a riddle than anything we can wrap our heads around.

There are no shortcuts, says Jesus, and this path we're on is no glory road. The rising will come, but only through the crucible of suffering.

Arguably the most important job in the country of Liberia today, is the job of retrieving the bodies of those who've fallen victim to the Ebola virus. On Thursday I heard a piece on NPR in which the reporter followed a crew of workers as they went to pickup the virus' latest victims.[5]

Because of the deadly power of Ebola and the heightened fear that's sweeping through Monrovia, Liberia's largest city, this team of body retrievers takes all the precautions they possibly can before going about their duty: full body suits, rubber boots, special gloves, face masks and goggles.

They tape their sleeves shut with meticulous care and check each other for exposed skin. Their lives and the lives of their families depend on it. But their last defense is prayer.

Gathering in a circle the men touch each other's gloved hands, and pray:

[5] Following excerpts are from an NPR program from 8-28-2014. To listen to the full program, follow this link: http://www.npr.org/programs/all-things-considered/2014/08/28/343968616?showDate=2014-08-28

> "God our Father, as we are going in ... may you be the protector. We will take the precautionary measures, but may you seal us with your Holy Spirit and with your angels."

Despite the pay — $1000 a month, generous by Liberian standards — the men say their families do not want them doing this work. One worker, a college student, says his parents won't even let him stay in the house. They're worried he's going to infect them all. The parents of another, an artist named Fofana, have begged him to quit.

"My mom and dad don't want me to do this job," he says. "But I feel I should do it to save my nation." Like the other men, Fofana says that what started as a job has become a calling. He is seeing firsthand how crucial this work is to stopping Ebola's spread. He knows the risks. But, he says, someone's got to do it: "I'm going to save my country. If I die, I die for my country."

There have been plenty of sermons and writings through the centuries that have encouraged people —and it's usually women and society's more vulnerable persons—to accept their station, to deny themselves and their needs and to put up with personal suffering, even to embrace it silently.

Telling those who suffer systematic mistreatment at the hands of the more powerful that they should accept it is wrong. That's not what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel.

What Jesus is telling us is that, in God's economy, suffering is not for losers and it is not God's judgment. Suffering is a fundamental component of the human story, but suffering is not the final end of that story.

Jesus knew that suffering would be integral to his journey, that it would appear to his followers that suffering was the final word; but it would not be the final word. The final word would be resurrection.

I heard an interview this week with Diane Foley, the mother of James Foley, the journalist who was killed by his ISIS captors earlier this month.[6]

She spoke of a letter that one of James' fellow captors, Daniel Rye Ottosen, delivered to her after receiving his freedom. It wasn't a written letter, but a letter James had asked Ottosen to commit to memory. When he was freed from captivity, Ottosen called Mrs. Foley and dictated to her what he had memorized.[7]

From Ottosen she learned what a strong presence her son had been among other captive journalists. How, in the midst of their suffering there was also a joy they shared in the company of one another.

She learned that James was feeling her and her family's prayers - that he was not despondent but instead very hopeful and compassionate to those in captivity. That he brought some of his fun-loving spirit to that dark place.

> "I was very… thankful to hear," she said, "that Jim was one of those who had a tremendous amount of strength. So he was feeling our prayers. And he had some peace within him, thank God."

[6] This New York Times op ed piece included background on Mr. Foley's execution: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/22/opinion/james-foleys-execution-and-the-question-of-ransom.html?_r=0

[7] You can find the full interview here: http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=344036631

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Foley, who'd been held captive for six weeks in Libya during an earlier assignment, had made the decision to return to a conflict zone—this time in Syria—about a year later. How, his mother was asked, did she understand his decision to return?

> "We really did not want him to go back," she said, "But…he was drawn to some of the drama, some of the…rawness of the conflict zones. He also really was very touched by the suffering of the civilians in the midst of it all. I think he felt he'd had a very privileged childhood, if you will, and that he felt he needed to bear witness to the suffering of others."

There are no ready answers to the suffering that is so much a part of our world, and, at times, our own stories. When one area of injustice is addressed, others rise to take its place, spreading like a deadly virus. Suffering is built into the very nature of life.

Yet Jesus, who endured all things, has shown us that suffering can lead to redemption, and while we make our way step by step through this life, he calls us to be a community of compassion for one another and for our neighbor.

And as we live into that calling, a vocation that belongs to each one of us, he promises to always be with us.

That, sisters and brothers, is a promise worth holding onto. That is a promise worth building our lives and our mission around.

Amen.