

Last Saturday, some of us gathered in this space to hear artist, Chloe White talk about the Stations of the Cross she created for St. Benedict's. As part of her time with us, we walked, together, from station to station as Chloe talked about the creative influences that informed her work, and about the impact the work has had on her. We weren't praying the Stations of the Cross, but the experience of listening to Chloe and encountering each station with her and with each other was absolutely, I thought, a spiritual experience. Chloe's own story and her interpretation, enriched my own, along with the reflections many of you offered. It was an experience for sure, that I felt deeply – and I think some others did, too.

And this is the power of spiritual practice in general, I think - and of the Stations of the Cross, in particular - that we *experience*, and that we learn from what we experience as we practice.

The Stations of the Cross is a hard practice. It draws us into the suffering of Jesus, and carries us to a place beyond words, and it has us linger there, it holds us, there, as we move slowly and deliberately from one Station to the next.

The agony of Jesus' Passion becomes all there is. The suffering is hard to hold. Suffering, that perhaps, we wish we didn't have to feel.

Why didn't Jesus use his power to do more? Why didn't he crush the oppressive Roman Empire? Why didn't he rain hellfire down on those who revel in the violence of torture and war? Why didn't he just fix it all? Why didn't he prevent his own death?

If you've ever asked these questions, if you've ever wrestled with questions like these, know you are not alone.

When contemplating the truth of God, questions like these, I think, are entirely valid, and humans have been asking them since the beginning.

And asking them is good, because it's by taking seriously what God does not do, thinking deeply about what God does not do that something very important about this life, about our lives, might be revealed.

We live finite lives in a finite world, and this, in the absence of any other circumstances or happenings, will cause us to suffer. We suffer when we confront death, our own, or the deaths of those we love. We suffer as we deal with the 'little deaths' in life, the changes we don't control. Many endings will bring suffering with them.

No matter how deep our faith, how unshakeable our trust in God, we will feel pain. God does not take that pain away, God does not remove our suffering, suffering is in and of this finite world; Jesus himself wept at the death of his beloved friend Lazarus.

We can't think suffering away, rationalize it away. Suffering must be accepted. And that's an uncomfortable truth of life. And so we must sit a while with this truth, take time to work it through as a spiritual practice.

The alternative is to try to push it away or deny it, the alternative is to live in fear of suffering and fiercely insist that it play no role in our life. Looking around at the world we live in, we can see the efforts of trying to distract ourselves from the reality of suffering, the ways our own fear of suffering become the cause of someone else's suffering. Our fear of having to suffer can drive us to try to control the world around us, and the people in it, it can us behave in a God-like way.

If I can just stop this or that from happening, stop this or that person doing this or that, control how this plays out, manage all aspects of my life to be the way I want them to be ... then I won't suffer.

But that's not true.

Jesus' difficult story is a story of what it is to be human in this world, and it's a story of the truth of God, and God's relationship with us. Suffering, as a human, in this finite life, is unavoidable; but our response to suffering is a choice ... and how we choose to respond, how we practice responding will have an impact, not only to our own lived experience, but to the very many ways our own lives are an integral part of the whole story of this world. Our response to suffering can heal or it can do terrible harm.

The time after Jesus' betrayal, and before his crucifixion, must have been a time of intense emotional agony, a time of terrible psychological and spiritual suffering, and yet Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.¹ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."²

We don't really get to decide not to be afraid, or to not fear suffering, but we can come to trust Jesus' words and understand them when we set down our sentence-making minds and fully inhabit our whole self and *this* can be the fruit of intentional spiritual practice, of the experience we have as we practice. There is deep wisdom held within the essence of what it is to be human, God's presence is inseparable from who and what we are.

¹ John 14:1

² John 14:27

And this presence is love.

Confronting our own sufferings and the horrendous human-designed, human-perpetuated sufferings in the world, it can seem, on the surface, to be an absolutely absurd proposition that we should not be afraid! But the alternative is to live a life that's fear-based and fear-driven, navigating life, making decisions and choices and acting, to avoid suffering at all costs.

If we're afraid, we'll either retreat, pull back, withdraw – not participate in all that life is, not live fully – or we can come out fighting, we might confront, try to control as much of life as we can, be quick to attack, lashing out because we're afraid, and trying to control our fear of suffering through violences of all kinds.

... but if we can just get to it, if we can just reach deep enough, get our minds out of the way for long enough, if we can just figure out, for ourselves, how to connect with what's already within, we will begin to shift our thinking, and we will begin to let go of fear.

Jesus loved, he loved those he encountered along the way, he loved his friends, his mother, his family, he understood and made real the power of the love of God in the world, and we are inheritors of that love.

We have everything we need for this life journey, we already have everything we need to navigate our own suffering, we are the disciples of the one who has shown the way.

Jesus' way is freedom from fear; is courage and strength through and from the love that is the Source of All; and it is the insistence that whatever we encounter in this life, death will not win.

Our Holy Week walk with Jesus from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem ... to the foot of the cross ... and then on to the empty tomb ... is agonizing and revelatory, and we're called, each year, to experience some of that.

We can't dodge suffering, but we can love, always, and despite it all. This is what we were created for, and for life, and this is why Jesus came into this world, so that we might have life and have it abundantly.³ So practice, practice letting love drive out fear; love with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind;⁴ so that when we take up our cross⁵ we might faithfully follow, by the mighty power of God's love, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life!⁶ Amen.

³ John 10:10

⁴ Matthew 22:37

⁵ Matthew 16:24

⁶ John 14:6