

## The Suffering Servant: Sufficiency, Servitude, Species

As a school chaplain and spiritual educator, I have a passion for wisdom. Although wisdom is often seen as synonymous with intelligence and education, it isn't. It is possible to be incredibly intelligent and educated without being at all wise. A good education can be acquired. Wisdom, on the other hand, is given. We are all born with a great deal of it – I am sure that every one of you could tell me something wise you heard from the lips of a child. Most of us lose it during our “productive years” when the cares of the world take over, but it very often returns when we get old, after we've been around the block a few times and are less intimidated by the world.

This world has always been a problem. The human brain has an amazing ability to construct its own realities. We do it in the same way that we construct tools and construct language. We are natural storytellers. We see patterns. We react to fear and desire. We connect dots and we jump to very convincing conclusions. We discover that we can lie. We talk about “real life,” as if our peculiar culture of stress were divinely ordained. We might wish to improve it, or, if we are able, change our position in it, but rarely does it occur to us that it might just be one more arbitrary construction.

Jesus came to earth to show us how far our human culture of fear and desire had wandered from God's wisdom and love. That is no easy task. In cultures whose power rests upon conquest, which is most of Western history, suffering and servanthood – the themes of today's readings, are the marks of failure. When Jesus says no, suffering and servanthood are part of the practice of truth, it is hard to believe him. The disconnect between the world and the Christ, if we can stick with it, is staggering. We all know that suffering hurts. Although all of us know that some suffering comes with the territory – all of us, for example, have been sick or injured, suffering is not something that a healthy person, in our view, would ever embrace. Servanthood may not be quite as unpopular as suffering, but it still raises a lot of ambivalent responses in my church women's group. It is a good thing in the case of community service or philanthropy, which is a gift of service, but when service is imposed upon us by others more powerful than we, it becomes servitude, and that is not a good thing at all. We have seen the ravages of slavery. We have seen the ravages of war. Slavery and war are what the culture of power uses to lord itself over us and scare us into compliance. Obey, and you will be spared suffering. You will be given influence, pleasure and ease. Being human, as one of my favorite TV characters once said, is a complicated gig. If it weren't, we would not need God.

The disciples gave themselves to Jesus because he promised to save them. Just before the conversation in today's Gospel, he has told his disciples for the third time that he will be handed over to suffering and death. This doesn't feel like hope, it feels like same old, same old Rome. Can any of us really trust the promise of resurrection in the face of the reality of death? That's the very human anxiety that I think James and John are feeling along the road. They want to know that what they have done has not been in vain. They only wish to be successful. That's all. And then Jesus says, “You do not know what you are asking.”

But they do know what they are asking. They want to be with Jesus in his glory. They want a happy ending. What could be clearer than that?

And Jesus asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

What an enigmatic answer! A yes that is also a no. What does Jesus mean "those for whom it has been prepared?" Is he hiding something?

Or have we entered a divine mystery?

One of the very interesting challenges in our whole climate change dilemma, and likewise in our species' quest to evolve from being a series of rival nation states to becoming a planet is that, as much as we want to do it, human beings have a very hard time thinking anything but locally. If we notice a litter problem in Mill Valley, for example, or think our schools are underfunded, it is relatively easy to raise a committee, start a collection, invite everyone out for a clean-up day, which is wonderful healthy service! But when the problem is melting in the arctic or desertification in Africa, or a free market system that works wonderfully in San Francisco and Manhattan, but impoverishes small farmers in Kenya, it is much harder to know how to respond. Statistics on a world map just don't have the same immediacy as garbage on Throckmorton. Even travel, even meeting these others face to face can be illusory, because we all come to the table with our own versions of the "real world" and what needs to be done. I know. I work at a school in Oakland that seeks to be as diverse as possible, and even when we love one another deeply, we're so amazingly different, it sometimes takes my breath away. And I realize that I may know much, but there's much, much more I don't understand.

It is not in the glory of my intelligence, but in the suffering of my ignorance, that I find God. God, you see, is all that I am not. God is the whole of which I am but the smallest part: the butterfly in the Sahara and the hurricane in Florida. The maize farmer in Kenya, the Athabascan in Arctic Village, the financier at One Market Plaza, the raccoon in the culvert, the ducks on Lake Merritt, the llamas in the Andes.

I can never know this beautiful interconnected wholeness; I can only love it and serve it. I can only play my own part with integrity and that involves listening and serving. The moment I start lording it over others, I risk upsetting everything. Power is not telling other people what to do; it is participating fully with them; it is seeing them as children of God. When Jesus is handed over to suffering and death, by the standards of the "real world," he has lost. He is the lowest of the low. But what Jesus teaches by his suffering, death and resurrection, is that he has not lost, because the ability to inflict suffering and death is not powerful. It is just bullying, fearful and unpleasant. It is the desperate act of

fearful men who believe that they can use death as a weapon. Jesus says you can't, because death is only a transition, not an end. For a God of love, even suffering and death are transformed into love. I know this because I have been with people as they have passed and seen transformation. Nothing is lost. Even the darkest grief is not so much about losing as it is about finding.

So it's important just to listen. Jesus didn't condemn James and John for wanting glory any more than he despaired last week of the rich young man and his possessions. Jesus teaches, Jesus waits, Jesus loves. He knows who we really are, even when we don't.

Suffering is like the weather. It is part of the cosmic balance just as rain and wind are part, but it is not everything. It is neither to be embraced nor avoided. Really, as a faith community in which I served taught me, there is only one thing to remember, and that is Love. God is Love. Practice Love. Practice Love on good days. Practice Love in the heart of suffering. Know that everything we are and everything we do matters in this great, interconnected web of life. Practice a little compassion every day. In this way, we glimpse what Richard promised last week: "A love impossible for us is possible for God."

Love, and all the rest will follow, no matter how impossible it may sound. I promise you, in Jesus' name, that this is true. AMEN.