Sunday, February 3, 1980
THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING
Psalm 121; Romans 8:18-25,28

The problem of suffering is a universal one. For thousands of years, we human beings have wondered why there is suffering among us and if there can be any meaning in suffering. We often ask, “Why does God permit pain and suffering to exist?”

To know what suffering is, you don’t have to be dying of starvation or malnutrition in Cambodia or India. You can live in a beautiful home in Lincoln and have children who are doing well in school. But if at the same time you are being divorced by your spouse of twenty years and know that you are no longer loved and are being specifically, methodically, legally, and publicly rejected, you know what suffering is.

Or you could be a man or woman of fifty who has been told by your employer that you are no longer needed. You might be a high school girl, overweight and miserable and wanting to die. You could even be the man who has everything, business success, social prestige, money, good looks, beautiful wife, bright children, who nevertheless struggles with some secret sin and guilt and inside you are suffering more than anyone will ever realize.

Human suffering may be difficult to precisely define, but it can be easily described. There is the suffering of the adolescent who is trying to understand who he or she is and wonders if anyone likes him or her. There is the suffering of the teenager who doubts that he or she will have a date for the homecoming dance.

And there is the suffering of the hungry, the homeless. There is the suffering of the abused child who can’t understand why he or she is the object of so much cruelty and abuse.

There is the suffering of a prolonged and painful illness which brings with it the craving for death. There is the suffering we bear from unjust criticism, gossip and complaining people. There is the suffering of parents who watch their child get in the wrong crowd, make disastrous decisions, and waste his or her talent and ability.

There is the suffering of the rejected child. There is the suffering of those in prison and in the jails of our country and the suffering of political prisoners all around the world.

There is the suffering of those who suffer on behalf of others — the parents who watch while their child is dying and know that nothing more can be done, or there is the suffering of the parents who see their child crippled or killed in an unavoidable accident.

Although it happened almost 20 years ago, I remember quite vividly the suffering of the mother who called to tell me that her 16-year-old son had been shot by a robber while he worked the late-night shift in a gasoline station. He had been alone, was shot in the stomach and died slowly over a period of hours because no one found him.

There is also the kind of suffering that comes from our own mistakes. I remember the intense suffering of an alcoholic when he finally realized how much suffering he had caused for others, particu1arly those c1osest to him.

Some people suffer from bad memories — so bad that when they think of them, they shudder and feel sick inside and the pain is still there.

There is also the suffering that comes from broken dreams. What hopes we had for our son or daughter! Or what hopes we had for ourselves! Each one of us has some broken dream, some dashed ambition, and we suffer because of disappointment.

Most human suffering falls into one of several categories. There is the suffering that cannot be easily prevented or maybe not prevented at all. Sometimes illness or an accident comes into our lives and all we can do is deal with the suffering that comes with it.

2. There is the suffering that we bring onto ourselves. Sometimes this can be creative or redemptive suffering because it comes from the willing acceptance of the risk, which is associated with expressing an unpopular view, or the taking of a stand which we know is right. A person, young or old will stand up for what she knows is right even though it goes against peer pressure.

There are those who work for peace and justice in society and suffer because of it. The civil rights struggle brought this kind of suffering to many people and is still doing so. Martin Luther King Jr. died for this cause.

In 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer, along with numbers of other black citizens began to attempt to register to vote in Mississippi. As part of the registration procedure, each person was given a section of the Mississippi State Constitution and asked to interpret it correctly. They usually failed the test if they were black, but many black people continued to make the long bus ride to the County Seat to try again.

In the coming months as Fannie Lou and others continued to attempt to register to vote, she was driven out of her home and fired from her job. Even though she moved into the next county, the terrorism against her continued. But this didn't stop her. She said, "I don't know why I kept coming, but I knew I wasn't doing anything wrong." The next time she went to register to vote she told the registrar, "Now you can't have me fired because I'm already fired and I won't have to move now, because I'm not living in a white man's house. I'll be here every 30 days until I become a registered voter." After many more months she was finally officially registered, but now it was as if she had become a criminal.

One day while traveling to another town, the bus on which she was riding stopped for a rest stop. Some of the passengers got off to get food and others to use the washroom. Fannie Lou made the mistake of going in the wrong door and used the door to the white side of the restaurant. She was one of seven arrested. They carried her to the county jail and put her in a cell. Soon she heard screaming like she had never heard before and she heard the sounds of another woman prisoner being beaten. She also heard someone say to the woman, "Can't you say, yes sir, nigger, can't you say yessir?" And the woman's response was, "Yes, I can say yessir, but I don't know you well enough." And the beating continued. Finally, Fannie Lou heard the woman start praying. She asked God to have mercy on them, because they didn't know what they were doing.

Next it was Fannie Lou's turn. They had discovered that she had been persistent in her efforts to become a registered voter and told her they were going to make her wish she was dead. They put her on a bunk and had two other prisoners take turns beating her. She was so badly beaten during the next half hour that she almost died.

Fortunately, Fannie Lou Hamer recovered and after seme months and went back to work helping other citizens register to vote.

This kind of suffering is redemptive suffering. Her suffering and the suffering of thousands like her was not only on behalf of the black people, but on behalf of all of us who value freedom in this country.

In Fannie Lou's case, which was the worst form of suffering, to be denied your rights as a citizen and do nothing about it or to try to gain your rights all the time knowing that you will suffer a great deal in the process and maybe give your life.

1. So the first po.int our faith teaches us in regard to suffering is that sometimes we have to choose between two kinds of suffering — that of simply enduring a bad situation passively or seeking to change the situation which may for a time bring us a more intense kind of suffering, but it may also bring redemption, not only for us but for many.

Some of us do our best to avoid that kind of suffering and therefore never dream dreams because we are not ready to pay the price to make them come true. Our only desire is to be secure, to be safe and protected from all suffering. Or our desire might be to endure one form of suffering rather than seek to get out of a situation because we are afraid that that would bring on another kind of suffering. That is to misuse suffering.

2. Another kind of danger in our society is for people to try to avoid any kind of suffering at all costs, so they never get deeply involved in anything.

Dr. Soelle writes, "One wonders what will become of a society in which certain forms of suffering are avoided gratuitously in keeping with middle class ideals. I have in mind a society in which a marriage that is perceived as unbearable quickly and smoothly ends in divorce. After divorce, no scars remain. Relationships between generations are dissolved as quickly as possible without a struggle. Periods of mourning are sensibly short. With haste the handicapped and sick are removed from the house and the dead from the mind. If changing marriage partners happens as readily as trading in an old car on a new one, then the experiences that one had in the unsuccessful relationship remain unproductive." Then we learn nothing from suffering and there is no redemption.

Our present culture is an anti-pain culture. We do almost anything to escape life's pain, and the resources of drugs and alcohol are always nearby to help us do so. Also, people try to avoid pain and suffering by never getting involved, by never risking love, or never risking anything. It is difficult to learn anything important at all in this world without suffering. Growth entails growing pains. Often the pain we experience is as much the birth pain of wholeness as it is a symptom of illness.

Those who wish to be spared all suffering worship a God whose goodness is mixed with a toleration of injustice. Theirs is a honey-sweet Christ, not the Christ crowned with thorns or the Christ on a cross.

3. There is no adequate answer to the problem of suffering, there is only the fact that we can use suffering, or we can misuse it. Our Christian faith does not tell us why people suffer or why there is pain in the world or why there is tragedy.

But our faith does tell us that God shares our suffering and our pain and that what we can do with suffering is to share it and use it. We can hold hands with the dying. We can protest against injustice. The worst of all evil is indifference to evil. Our faith tells us that we are not to fear suffering if our suffering springs from love; if it is like the God that Jesus Christ revealed who suffers because of his love for us. God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

When St. Francis of Assisi got down from his horse and embraced the suffering leper, he solved the problem of suffering for himself. And what was more, he was later able to accept and use his own suffering and to sing his way to death. He did not curse leprosy, nor did he curse God for making or allowing leprosy; he got down from his horse and kissed the leper. This act changed his whole life and the lives of countless others. From that time on, lepers became for St. Francis what the untouchables became for Gandhi, the children of God, and what the poor and the starving and the dying have become for Mother Teresa.

St. Francis and Gandhi and Mother Teresa and countless people like them have put aside doubt and anxiety and uncertainty and grief over the unsolvable mystery of pain and suffering and evil and sorrow and put themselves and their lives into God's hands to be made instruments of God's redemption, so that they might ease pain and conquer evil and give comfort and strength to the sorrowful.

This is the redemptive act — that is what God does in Jesus Christ — not to ask who dealt this wound to creation, and to accuse God of having dealt it, but to make one's life an instrument of God's peace. That is doubly redemptive in that it transforms both giver and receiver.

I have a friend who has had both her breasts removed and now has developed cancer of the spine, but her conversation is one of continual thanks to God and her friends and her neighbors. What is it that she knows? What has she found out? She has certainly not found out the answers to these difficult questions, but she has certainly found a meaning for her life. In some ways she has taken her suffering and made it her instrument, the use of which has given her this continual thankfulness and has given her friends a shining example of faith and courage and love.

She knows what the Apostle Paul knew, "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us...We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

Perhaps you saw the letter in the Lincoln Star this past week in which the writer wrote to her husband on the occas-ion of the birthday of their 33-year-old retarded son. She spoke of the pain, the suffering, the agony, but she went on to also speak of the joy that had come into their lives because of this son. She said, "Having Philip has made us all more tolerant of one another and each other's differences. It has not only taught us humility and to bear humiliation but given us also an enjoyment of life and each other we might not otherwise have had, a keener awareness of the beauty of life. Philip has taught us to laugh at ourselves and with him who loves to laugh. Above all, he has taught us patience. It hasn't been easy for any of us, this growing up of Philip, but it has been good for us."

As Christians, our answer to the problem of suffering is that our faith rests on the conviction that nothing, absolutely nothing in our lives is outside the realm of God's judgment love and mercy. Amen.