

Matthew 16:21-23

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Julianne Porras-Center

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Suffering with Surrender

Good morning and welcome Stone Church of Willow Glen.

Welcome to your spiritual home. Whether watching from online or here in the pews, I can honestly say it is a joy to be here with you on this Sunday morning. I like, as a guest preacher, to say welcome because it's very strange. This is my very first time here. I found parking with trepidation, I entered upon the hospitality of the ushers with caution, I do not know any of you.

And yet, and yet this is the house of the Lord. This is the promised kingdom of God – here, now, what we can access of it knowing in part and seeing in part. And so though I am a stranger and a sojourner, we are in many ways, family. Because we have both come here to be refreshed and renewed by the love and grace of our common God in this common home that you steward and call your own. So thank you for welcoming me home. And welcome home to you.

My name is Rev. Julianne Porras-Center, but you can call me Julie, and I am doubly new to this presbytery – I've been here just since September – coming to you as the Organizing Pastor of a new ministry we are calling Somos Watsonville. And there are about a million stories I would like to tell you about our neighbors and family members down in Watsonville, and I might – but first, I don't know about you, but I found a long time ago that my truest home is in the word of God, and the stories, and the challenges that it presents us.

So let us turn to that word of abundant life.

Matthew 16:21-23

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord!^[e] This shall never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance^[f] to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

This is the Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Phew. Heavy words. A doozy. When I read through the beautiful liturgy you all have been following through this season of Lent, and I turned to the fourth Sunday of Lent and I saw this scripture I.. was dumbstruck. I thought – oh boy, this must be hazing.

Because though Jesus was often sharper than we give him credit for. Though Jesus spoke many hard and ultimately kind truths that our society of niceness and politeness finds difficult. Though Jesus was not just a “go with the flow” “peace love and cupcakes” kind of prophet, but one which held people and systems accountable for their injustices. Though Jesus continues today to confound us with his living Word, it STILL IS NOT EVERY DAY that we hear Jesus rebuke his closest disciple as Satan.

I stared at this passage for hours. Confounded. But not for the reason you might think – not because I didn’t have anything to say. Not because I didn’t understand it.

No, I struggled with it, because as the funny kind of logic of God often goes, this is and has been the exact passage that I myself have been struggling with.

And I’m willing to bet your problem with it is pretty similar to mine.

You see, I’m someone who likes to be in control. You don’t know me, but you can ask my husband — better yet, pray for him.

I am someone who cherishes health and efficiency and things generally feeling like they’re working out alright.

I am someone who likes to avoid discomfort and pain and unnecessary suffering.

And I am someone who would call most suffering unnecessary and so seek to avoid it.

In other words, I, and I suspect you, am quite human.

I am like Peter.

And this passage is an all too real example of what happens when we are like Peter, and an all too surprising example of the way that Jesus continues to surprise us with teachings that turn our expectations absolutely upside down.

And I want us to empathize here with Peter. I want us to do something that in my chaplaincy training we called “Getting in the boat” with him. And that means sit there with him. Don’t try to pathologize. Don’t try to fix. Don’t even try to

understand. You can't. Not fully, not literally. Even on your worst day, I doubt Jesus has called you Satan.

Instead, try to identify how Peter might be feeling. And then try to remember a time in your life when you felt similarly.

Let's try this. So we have Peter we have to accept the suffering that is inevitable so that we can dismantle the suffering that is not. We must quit fighting against the healing we need in ourselves, so that we can heal others.

How much of the suffering that exists in this world is a result of valuing profit margins over people? How much of the suffering that exists in this world is a result of valuing comfort for a few over subsistence for many? How much of the suffering that exists in this world is result of valuing the whole world and not our own souls?

Peter, who grew up in the small fishing village of Capernaum in first century Palestine. Peter who I cannot help but believe was hungry for something greater in his previous life as a humble fisherman, because he became a follower of Jesus not after hearing a grand sermon, not after witnessing a miracle, but in an instance as simple as this:

Matthew simply writes: that While walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. Immediately, Matthew records. Peter was a man who was waiting for his world to be changed. And as we know, Peter had his world changed. Peter even had his name changed by Jesus – he was hungry for transformation in the deepest parts of his soul.

He wanted it. He believed it. And by all accounts, he was getting it. He had found the thing, the person, the teachings that made his soul sing – and he wanted to hold onto it.

You see, I think that our passage today makes a little more sense when we rewind a bit:

Matthew 13 records Jesus as asking his disciples the question that was on everyone's mind, "Who do you say that I am?" And it is Peter who recognizes him as the Christ, the messiah, the son of God. And Jesus, in sharp contrast to today's scripture, just a few verses before, exalts him:

Jesus says “Blessed are you! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock[b] I will build my church, and the gates of hell[c] shall not prevail against it.”

I can only imagine the awe and the wonder and the joy and the love that Peter felt in that instant. Hungry for transformation, he had been transformed, and he was being recognized and rewarded for it. He was receiving the favor and the respect of his God, his spiritual mentor, his closest companion. He was on top of the world.

The human world.

I can also imagine how crushed, how confused, how angry he was when shortly after he heard Jesus say that he would suffer and die. Crushed and confused and angry enough to not believe it. To deny it. To rebuke Jesus and say ““Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

I would translate “this shall never happen to you” to today’s “I could not bear it if that happened to you.”

And we might want to judge Peter we have to accept the suffering that is inevitable so that we can dismantle the suffering that is not. We must quit fighting against the healing we need in ourselves, so that we can heal others.

How much of the suffering that exists in this world is a result of valuing profit margins over people? How much of the suffering that exists in this world is a result of valuing comfort for a few over subsistence for many? How much of the suffering that exists in this world is result of valuing the whole world and not our own souls? we might want to shake our heads and say “Oh come on Peter – if you know this is the Messiah, you know you have to listen to him!” Get off your high horse and stop trying to control God!

But I’ll ask you:

Have you ever wanted to protect someone you love from something?

Have you ever wanted to protect yourself from something?

Have you ever tried to stop someone you love from making a mistake they felt they had to make?

Have you ever played it safe when you knew life was demanding that you take a risk?

Have you ever tried to cushion someone’s rock bottom?

Have you ever tried to control the outcome of something that was simply not yours to control?

Me too.

If you have, then perhaps you understand a bit of what Peter was going through.

I call it suffering with surrender.

You see, I like Peter, have a spiritual mentor. He's not quite as cool as Jesus, but he is an 85 year old Korean war vet, former Trappist monk, drop out priest, reiki practitioner, adopted father. He is the best. And he knows he is in what Richard Rohr calls the very end of the second half of life.

I call him and I tell him about my young person problems and he tells me the same thing every time: Surrender. And I ask him how he came to be so wise and he tells me the same thing every time: Surrender.

And I find myself fighting against this simple lesson like Peter – saying “there must be another way. There must be some way to avoid this suffering. Let's huddle up – let's game plan. Let's get moving. Maybe if we work hard enough, or we work efficiently enough, or if we schedule every single moment of our lives, we won't have to deal with this suffering. There must be another way.

And there is. And there isn't.

“Carl Jung believed that much unnecessary suffering came in the world because people will not accept the ‘legitimate suffering’ that comes simply from being human.”

The first of Buddha's 4 noble truths is that life has inevitable suffering.

Existentialist philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, and Stoic philosophers like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius believed that suffering was part of every person's fate.

Jesus tells us again and again that in this world we will face tribulation.

There is no avoidance to suffering. There was no way that the radical prophet of Jesus Christ, love incarnate, was getting out this broken world and its world without getting killed by it. And there is no way that any of us are getting out of it without losing something.

Jesus knew that – Peter did not want to know that. So Jesus had to tell him in a way that would make him hear it.

There is necessary suffering.

BUT the gospel doesn't end there, Buddha's noble truths do not end there, my spiritual mentor's phone calls do not end there, even Existentialists did not end there -- no wise lesson ends there in despair.

There IS good news.

Much of our suffering is not inevitable. Much of our suffering is self-inflicted. Much of our suffering is in fact our suffering against suffering, attempting to deny it, to control it, to prevent it.

There's different language for this in every tradition. For Buddhists the solution looks like the 8-fold path. For existentialists, it looks like Amor Fati – the love of fate – the decision to love what happens to you no matter what.

For Jesus it looks like Gethsemane, the Prayer, “Thy will be done”

And for Peter and for me on most days and for most of us it looks like madness, and yet it is the paradoxical and infuriating truth that is at the heart of the Lenten season.

We must have fasting to have feasting. We must know hell to appreciate heaven. We must endure good Friday to celebrate Easter Sunday. We must die to be reborn.

We must surrender to regain control of our lives and our fates.

So I ask you again to empathize with Peter, to get in the boat. Where in your life do you need to surrender?

What suffering have you been seeking to avoid? What hard truths have you been ignoring?

Where, like Peter, have you set your mind on the things of humanity rather than the things of God?

I'll tell you one thing, whenever this truth finally hits me, whenever I actually hear my spiritual mentor when he says Surrender – that is when I don't just say “yeah yeah yeah” – It becomes so much clearer to me what matters and what doesn't, what are mere tasks and what are genuine goals, what are the things of God and what are the things of my ego.

Just like I think the context before this difficult passage helps shine a light on it, I think the one that follows is essential.

Matthew 16:24-26

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a person if they gain the whole world and forfeit their soul? Or what shall a someone give in return for their soul?"

What this suggests to me is that we have to accept the suffering that is inevitable so that we can dismantle the suffering that is not. We must quit fighting against the healing we need in ourselves, so that we can heal others.

How much of the suffering that exists in this world is a result of valuing profit margins over people? How much of the suffering that exists in this world is a result of valuing comfort for a few over subsistence for many? How much of the suffering that exists in this world is result of valuing the whole world and not our own souls?

There are only so many battles we can fight in our lives. There are only so many hours in a day. Only so many days in a week. Only so many weeks in a year, years in a life. Decisions we can make.

Time is precious and sacred, almost as precious and sacred as time + attention and intention.

And when we surrender, when we love our fates, when we accept the overwhelming peace in the midst of suffering that God has for us, we can be more generous with our time and attention and intention.

I come this morning from Watsonville, a little town that has absolutely taken and broken my heart. I told you I would tell you just a little about my ministry and I will. I have been tasked to plant a bilingual ministry and build community in the heart of Watsonville, which seems to me so many days as the heart of suffering here in California's central coast.

In order to meet people, to build community, to make a place that feels like home – like church – we turned the chapel into a café, and in that café, I do a lot of what I would call city chaplaincy. That is, people come in, and maybe it's the stained glass image of Jesus or maybe it's the trauma that is so intense that it is crying to come out, or maybe it's that no English-speaking person has ever really asked them about themselves as a human being, but they share their stories. Their sacred stories. Stories which no statistics can capture – that only face to face interaction like the kind that happens in a shared third space can capture.

The poverty statistics don't do justice to the number of people who despite working incredibly hard, just don't have enough to eat. I watch hundreds of families line up for food distributions. These are not families who do not work – they work in the fields, and they can show the arthritis in their hands, their twisted backs from the backbreaking labor that they endure which still does not produce enough money to feed their families.

The low education and graduation rates don't do justice to the lack of literacy in the community. One week, a distribution was cancelled, and a flier was put up, and yet people were still there. And I asked them, and I pointed to the poster, and they said "Oh, I don't.. I don't know how to read."

No climate model can do justice to the way that climate change is affecting the economies on which their lives depend. It cannot show the homes lost – the American dreams destroyed – in natural disasters like the Pajaro floods last year. It cannot do justice to the lack of infrastructure that exists in the poorest neighborhoods of the poorest towns to support crises that will become more and more common.

And I tell you this because I believe that the farmworker community of Watsonville is experiencing suffering that is absolutely unnecessary. That is a choice that we and our systems make by ignoring them.

And because I believe that we, this Presbytery, this region, can experience so much healing by surrendering our necessary suffering and standing against the unnecessary suffering of others.

And because I believe that like Peter, Jesus is begging us to take up our crosses and set our hearts on the things of God.

So let us close with the Serenity prayer: Lord, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Amen.