



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday July 2, 2017 – Trinity III

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Epistle:

“But the God of all grace, who has called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after ye have suffered a little while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen and settle you.” 1st St. Peter 5:10

We are often challenged by people who ask us how we can serve a God who allows us to suffer. The question makes us uncomfortable, because we don't fancy ourselves to be great theologians, or even accomplished apologists for our faith. This is a question that faces us from the world of unbelievers and from the deep recesses of self, where our own doubts about our faith lurk. Answering this question in a manner that reflects both truth and compassion, in our conversation and in our lives, is the most important way we can proclaim our faith.

How it is that we can worship a God that allows us to suffer is a hard question. It deserves a good answer. In fact, in Jesus there is a good answer. It is not an easy answer, either to understand or to profess, but it is the Truth, and it is the story of our salvation, so we need to have the answer on the tip of our tongue.

God allows us to suffer because He loves us.

That is a shocking statement, especially to this world and culture, but it is absolutely true. Thank God.

To understand how that statement is true, we have to understand why we suffer and what

suffering really is. First, suffering comes from sin. There was no suffering in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve walked with God, and knew him face to face. They lived in harmony with God and with His creation. It was only once they had sinned, and were being cast from the Garden, that God introduced suffering to man. Eve has to suffer in labor for children. Adam is to suffer in toil for his bread. Suffering only exists for mankind because in Adam and Eve, we have inherited a sinful nature. But before we get into the discussion of the fairness of inherited sin, we need to honestly confess the correlative truth. Suffering exists in our own lives because personally, and individually, we are still sinners.

Whether it is inherited sin or personal sin that begets our suffering is unimportant, because in the end, all sin, inherited and personal, has a common root. In fact all sin is really one sin. Sin is placing our will to serve our own desires above our duty to serve God with our whole heart and mind and soul. It is the use of the gifts that we have been given, our sensibility, our minds, bodies, our very lives, to the service of our own desire ahead of the service of God's desire for us. Sin is man playing God, pretending that we are capable of controlling what is God's to command, our relationship with creation, our relationships with each other and our relationship to God.

Suffering is, in a real sense, our punishment for sin, but only in the sense that suffering is also the cure of sinfulness. There is an end to our suffering. In fact there are two ends. There is the

end of suffering that comes when our time in this time is over. No matter how much we suffer, we know that at the end our time suffering is replaced by consolation, peace and love. We also know that there is an end to our suffering in the sense that we suffer with purpose. Our suffering, properly and humbly offered, is sacrifice. With sacrifice, and the diminution of our selfishness and pride, comes understanding of the benefit that is intended from our suffering. That benefit is both for our own souls and the souls of those God has given to us for ministry. In that sense, God asks no more of us than He was willing to ask His Son on our behalf.

Jesus Christ suffered and died for us to restore us to a life free from sin. That is how the Second Person of the Trinity expressed His love for His Father and His love for us, because He offered that suffering as a sacrifice. We confess that it is by giving the Son for that purpose that the Father expresses His love. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him, should not die but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

The love of the Son for His Father and for us is evident in the sacrifice that Jesus accepted. He did not have to suffer and die, because He had no sin. The temptations Jesus had in the desert and in the Garden of Gethsemane prove that he had a choice. He was not an unwilling sacrifice, bound with cords the way Isaac was by Abraham. His prayer in the Garden that the cup might pass away from His lips is also proof that He didn't want to suffer, but He trusted the Father, He accepted his suffering, and offered it in sacrifice.

Though we don't deserve it, God treats us as His children. He did not make us to suffer. He made us to walk with Him in the cool of the evening, to talk to Him face to face, to be in Communion with Him, to live eternally in His love and light. In doing so, He made us Persons, as He is, with free will, allowing us even to spurn His commandments and His love in favor of our own willfulness. There was no suffering for Adam and Eve until there was sin. And God never gave us suffering for its own sake. He is not capricious and mean and vengeful. He allows us to suffer so that we will learn the lessons that come from choosing our will instead of His. He wants us to understand the pointlessness, and hurtfulness and terror of a

world in which we are God. We suffer so that we will choose something better, so that we will choose to have the Father for our God, and so that we will turn the suffering we have chosen into the sacrifice that opens the door for the Holy Spirit to bring us repentance, sorrow for our pride, obedience for our will. He wants us to understand suffering so that we can choose to know better, so that we will choose hope, and life and love.

More importantly. He doesn't leave us on our own to learn the lessons that come from suffering, because God knows with all the time in the world, we still wouldn't choose His will for us instead of our own willfulness. He gives His only Son to make the sacrifice for us. He gives us His Holy Word to teach us. He gives us His sacraments so that he can be in us, lifting us up, transforming and converting our lives so that we can become more Christ-like, more obedient, more selfless, more loving. He gives us our Community, our church, our parishes, and families so that we can persevere. His Holy Spirit waits in our hearts and minds to strengthen every inclination we have to godliness.

Which is what the Gospel for today teaches us, that though we suffer a little while, He is already working to heal and comfort us. Like the Good Shepherd, He is searching for us before we even know we are lost. Like the woman who finds the lost coin, He rejoices at our conversion. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, He is racing down the mountain, ready to restore us to our inheritance, to our former life, to our place in the family, even when our repentance is not perfect, and only selfishly motivated to avoid our deserved suffering. He accepts us, restores us, reconciles us, and transforms us. He makes our suffering transient, and He makes our poor imitation of his sacrifice for us transcendent.

Yes, we serve a God who allows us to suffer. “But the God of all grace, who has called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after we have suffered a little while, will make us perfect, stablish, strengthen, and settle us.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen