



“Suffering Servants”

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Scripture (CEV):

Isaiah 53:4-12

⁴ He suffered and endured great pain for us,
but we thought his suffering was punishment from God.

⁵ He was wounded and crushed because of our sins;
by taking our punishment, he made us completely well.

⁶ All of us were like sheep that had wandered off.

We had each gone our own way, but the LORD gave him the punishment we deserved.

⁷ He was painfully abused, but he did not complain.

He was silent like a lamb being led to the butcher,
as quiet as a sheep having its wool cut off.

⁸ He was condemned to death without a fair trial.

Who could have imagined what would happen to him?

His life was taken away because of the sinful things his people^[a] had done.

⁹ He wasn't dishonest or violent, but he was buried in a tomb
of cruel and rich people.^[b]

¹⁰ The LORD decided his servant would suffer as a sacrifice
to take away the sin and guilt of others.

Now the servant will live to see his own descendants.^[c]

He did everything the LORD had planned.

¹¹ By suffering, the servant will learn the true meaning of obeying the LORD.

Although he is innocent, he will take the punishment for the sins of others,
so that many of them will no longer be guilty.

¹² The LORD will reward him with honor and power for sacrificing his life.

Others thought he was a sinner, but he suffered for our sins and asked God to forgive us.

Mark 10:42-45

⁴² But Jesus called the disciples together and said:

You know that those foreigners who call themselves kings like to order their people around. And their great leaders have full power over the people they rule. ⁴³ But don't act like them. If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. ⁴⁴ And if you want to be first, you must be everyone's slave. ⁴⁵ The Son of Man did not come to be a slave master, but a slave who will give his life to ransom¹ many people.

Sermon:

There is nothing more, that most of us want, than to live in peace. To raise our kids, have meaningful work, friends and family with whom we are in harmony. Food on the table, a roof over our heads, a glass of wine, now and again!

It doesn't seem like too much to ask.

Yet the world seems to be embroiled in much distress, warfare, injustice. There is much suffering.

People don't get the peace to raise their children without fear.

People often don't know where the next meal will come from, or where they will go, as they run from war, starvation, persecution.

The average stay in a refugee camp has gone from about 18 months to the extreme of 17 years. The number of refugees worldwide has swollen to hundreds of millions.

At home in the USA, we are divided and angry with one another. There is vicious behavior from the highest office in the land, right down to the kids in the schoolyard. On our streets, in our churches, wherever we look there is both meanness, and despair.

There are plenty here in the USA who don't know where they will sleep, or where their next meal is coming from.

There is suffering. Much sorrow, much suffering.

And yet, Isaiah declares that there is one who will come to carry that suffering, and ransom those who have done the suffering, and experienced the suffering. This one will pay the price for their suffering, to save them from suffering.

Then Jesus declares that in the Kingdom of God anyone who walks with him, must be willing to work hard for others, work hard even without thanks, without power of wealth or influence.

That is the life of a servant, even a slave.

What shall we make of all this?

Is it Jesus who is the servant, the meek lamb, the one who will ransom, who will pay the price for our human wrongdoing?

Is it Jesus who will show the way to a world of peace through service to all people?

Well, yes. For me, and for many other Christians, Jesus is our lamb, our servant, our model of sacrificial love.

I believe that there are many historic and contemporary voices of spiritual leaders seeking to teach humankind the way of service, of love and care, beyond greed or distorted attachment.

Their teachings are at work throughout the world to lift it up beyond war, beyond cruelty to neighbor, beyond suffering.

And for me, and perhaps for you, our role model, our teacher, our guide tells us this: Be prepared to serve, to work hard, on behalf of others, out of love for others.

For power will not save us. And money will not save us. Even being learned has not saved us.

Rather, love of one another will save us. Even the unlovable ones.

And all our good; of home and food, of peace and contentment, will come from our willingness to love one another. Across borders, across the street...**loving care is all that can save us.**

And you, each of you, each of us...has the capacity to offer loving care, offer generous attention, offer friendship, and ally-ship, and a casserole, or the "pronoun button" we really need to validate who we are.

Yes, we have this capacity. It is work, the work of loving kindness, and it is our great work.

There is struggle involved, even suffering, involved.

- I know you. And some of you who love creatures, suffer deeply when animals are treated cruelly. When species are swept to extinction, you suffer.
- You suffer for the homeless and the refugees... they are more than numbers to you and their suffering you share. Their displacement and misery causes compassion to well up in you.
- I know you, and you are angry and activated that our nation, which we love, is so deeply divided and our political experiment so perverse and broken. You are suffering, too.
- You are heartbroken at the random killing, the suicides, the despair and suffering of so many; this causes you pain. You are in pain with the parents of dead children, for the murdered trans-woman, for the one who jumped to their death.
- You are suffering for our planet as it is wracked by pollution and destruction.
- You have your suffering, as servants of Jesus. Your hearts ache for the lost and the lonely. Your arms ache from the burdens you carry. Sometimes, you may be weary beyond caring and you must stop, rest, renew and restore.
- Sometimes, the one who restores you is a dear friend. Sometimes it is the words of a wise teacher. Sometimes, it is a whole community.

I was so sad, and so tired last Spring, I felt I would never sleep well again, and that I had no energy left to serve you, my beloved congregation, or the world around us.

I walked into the days of summer thinking I was **dried up and done, used up and useless**; and it was frightening. But God placed in my presence gifts of people, and sunshine, of quiet, and prayer, and peace, that restored my heart and soul.

I had psychological therapy and physical therapy and fun therapy and rest, rest, rest. I had mountains of kindness heaped on me, and I played a lot, too. I dug in my garden, enjoyed my grandchildren, and took lots of naps.

So I can stand before you and say with assurance, that I know you are gifted servants, for you supported and gifted me.

And I know you, too, can receive rest and restoration, renewal and joy in life, because I received it from you and from so many others, too.

Wonderful people stirred up the gifts of my life from the dregs of the cup of sorrow that I was drinking last year.

And behold. I found courage, and laughter. Quiet and peace, and energy and friendship and laughter.

I received the great gift that is you; the people of Westminster.

You, each of you, is a gift to others. Each of you has beauty within, and talents that you may share, (or you may be shy about sharing). But there is within each person here, great love and compassion, the power to befriend, and the power to heal hearts and lives, with your loving care.

You have your gifts. Never doubt it. Yes you do.

I found Christ-like servants with the energy to give, the love to share, and so many talents; so much hopefulness, and so much possibility, and so much laughter!

Thank you, people of Westminster, for being servants in the service of Christ, and for serving so well.

I see this in you:

We know the cost of our discipleship to the God who is Love, we know suffering and sorrows; but we also receive surprising joys, unexpected tenderness, the gifts of others in all their beauty, skill and kindness.

Hear This: You are a blessing. To me. To one another. To this city.

Praise God, alleluia.

Amen.