

4 Easter – Year A – May 18, 2011 - Homily
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10
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Some of you might know the story of Joni Eareckson Tada. She was just a teenager when she literally dived into the waters of suffering, breaking her neck and becoming a quadriplegic. As she struggled through the dramatic changes in her life, deep depression and frequent thoughts of suicide, she turned to God, at first in great anger, and later in an ever-deepening relationship. She has since become an internationally acclaimed author, artist, and Christian speaker. Here's a story from Joni that speaks well to our lesson from 1 Peter tonight.

“You're walking down a street, minding your own business, when you are [suddenly] accosted and forced to carry a huge and heavy basket on your back. You're ordered to walk three blocks, turn left, go two blocks, turn right, then proceed straight on. Staggering under the weight, you stumble on, bewildered and angry. The weight of the basket is crushing. Your back is breaking. The whole thing [seems to be] meaningless. You resent how the heavy burden consumes you, becoming the focal point of your entire existence [in that moment]. When you are halfway around the third block, reeling under the burden, you finally bellow, "What's [going on]?" The truth is then revealed. The burden you are carrying is your child, injured and unconscious. "What?" On top of that, you are not trudging through a meaningless rat maze but the most direct route to a hospital emergency room. Immediately you straighten up. You inhale new vigor. Your knees quit buckling. Adrenaline and fresh energy quicken your pace, and you move forward with a new attitude. Why the change? [Because] the suffering you're going through involves a relationship. Not just any relationship, but one with your child. It is the love you have for your child that quickens your steps and buoys up your heart. *Your relationship* gives your burden meaning.” (End quote). Ask any parent with a seriously ill child whether they would gladly take that suffering upon themselves to spare the child, and you'll almost certainly hear an affirmative response. Now let's put it into our own context, especially in our own relationships. What about God **the** Father, God **our** Father? Does He gladly take upon Himself suffering for our sake?

This week's lesson from 1 Peter is a tough one about courageously enduring unjust suffering. It was originally addressed to Christian slaves whose masters were probably not Christian. From a slightly broader perspective, which applies well to modern-day Christians, Peter is addressing a marginalized group within a secular world. The first thing we have to make clear is that we are most definitely not called to seek out, participate in, turn away from, or act complicitly in the unjust suffering of anyone, including ourselves. Peter notes in the first line of this reading that for Christians, the context of our suffering is an awareness or consciousness of God. In other words, the context for our own suffering is our relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Given that we are in the season of Easter, celebrating the hope of the resurrection, we have just experienced clear evidence that the nature of God as revealed by Christ on the cross is to embrace unjust suffering. We can truthfully say that God suffers on behalf of others and stands with us in our own suffering. Christ willingly gave up His life for the sins of the whole world.

Peter tells us that Christ's suffering was an example for us. He then goes on to explain what that example means, including refusing to return abuse, not threatening revenge or retaliation, but trusting God through it all. However, we are called to action in our suffering and that action is to do good, to live in right relationship with God, and to love our neighbors despite what we are going

through. To put it another way, Love doesn't retaliate, but breaks the spiral of violence. Love is always oriented to God and service to others in relationship with Christ Jesus. In striving for this kind of change in our natural response, we experience a shift in perspective. If we live in reverent awe before God, which is what Peter means by being aware of God, everything that happens in our lives comes into perspective through this new lens. When we trust that God is working for our greatest good, the only question we have to ask ourselves is "How am I living before God in this moment?"

So many of us look upon unjust suffering as a rejection by others, or even worse as some kind of divine punishment. Peter is adamant that our suffering is not to be understood as a measure of God's perspective or love. Our self-worth is not determined by the unjust actions of others, and in no way reflects how much God loves and values each of us as His children. Jesus' resurrection teaches us that God's redemption is always life giving, expansive, and full of possibility. We do know that Jesus suffered, and as His disciples, we're not spared suffering in our own lives. We also know that guarded and embraced in the ever-loving arms of the shepherd of our souls, God will guide us into healing and abundant life. Our work is to trust God, and lean on Him for strength to endure courageously.

There is also an element of discernment here, and discernment requires relationship with God in Christ Jesus in order to hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. There may be aspects of our lives that need to die in order for God's abundant blessings to be realized for us or for our community. We may not realize how much our periods of suffering have enabled us to grow in trust and faith until much later. Many speak of the gift of compassion for others that grows out of our own experiences. We may never know the strength we have given others through our own courage in the face of suffering, yet God's will is done on earth as in heaven. Equally, we may not understand how deeply we affect the lives of others when we faithfully live out our trust in God through life's hardships. In it all, we have to remember that our society is generally one that doesn't immediately look at the world or suffering through the same lens that we do. After all, the world interprets "trust" as a safe place to store money. From one shining light of God's grace to all the lights in this place, our final words tonight are from Joni Eareckson Tada. "When we suffer and handle it with grace, we're like walking billboards advertising the positive way God works in the life of someone who suffers."

Amen.