

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity  
30 July, Anno Domini 2017  
St. Mark 8:1-9  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I have been meeting with many in this congregation lately who are struggling with enduring times of trial and suffering. And the repeated question is “Why? Why is God doing this to me? Why isn’t He answering my prayers?” And we have all asked the same question at one time or another. We have all felt trapped, isolated, and hopeless. Our pain and suffering seem endless and, maybe even worse, pointless. We cry out. We lament. We grow angry with God.

We can accept that there is a spiritual battle being waged over our souls and that there will be times when our consciences are a fierce war zone. There will be pain and anguish. But what about our bodies? What have they got to do with it? What use is perpetual physical suffering? Why must there be aching in our joints and organs? Why must there be addictions? Why must we endure pains that no one can diagnose and treat? Why are children conceived never to see the face of their parents? Why do expensive surgeries and procedures fail to produce healing or even relief?

The answer lies in the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed - not the answer to your specific suffering per say, but to all physical suffering, including yours. We are created beings. God, the Father Almighty, grants life to each of us. It is His will and His will alone, that we exist. He knit us together in our mother’s wombs. We are His handiwork and we are subject to His good and gracious will every day of our lives. Every second that we continue in life is due to His providence and sustenance. If God were to withdraw His hand from any part of creation for a nanosecond, all of creation would cease to exist.

And that is exactly what Satan wishes for you. Those are the seeds that Satan continues to giddily sow throughout creation because He hates all things that God creates, including you. He loves war and devastation. He loves pain and suffering of any kind. He loves death. He loves your death. When our first parents rejected God’s gracious Word and took what was forbidden, they unleashed destruction and devastation on every last bit of creation. That’s not what God created. God created life. God breathed His own life, His own Holy Spirit into man so that man would enjoy eternal life with

God - not destruction, not disease, not mental illnesses, not broken families, not shadows on x-rays. Only life.

The suffering you experience in your body and mind are fresh and constant reminders that creation, including us, is broken. It is a reminder that there is no part of you that isn't subject to sin's devastation. Certainly the Divine Potter fashioned and made you. But you were broken clay to begin with. There isn't anyone who can escape that reality on this side of eternity. Satan knows that your body will rise on the last day and spend an eternity wherever your soul does and he will use whatever means necessary to make sure that all of you is in hell, eternally separated from God, enduring truly eternal suffering and torment.

But there is something curious going on in today's Gospel. Something that should actually bring us a great deal of comfort in the midst of our own bodily suffering. Jesus knew. He knew the crowd's predicament. He knew how long it had been. It's almost as though Jesus is responsible for this situation, for drawing the crowd out where there was no food, no available means by which the people could provide food for themselves. Jesus wasn't speaking in hyperbole when He said that if the people were to leave now and try to find food, they would faint, they would pass out from hunger. Their situation was dire with absolutely no way for them to fix it.

Jesus wanted the crowd and He wants you to know your need for Him in every way. It's all too common that we limit Jesus to being only a spiritual helper, as though He will take care of the soul stuff and we are in charge of caring for our bodies. And there is nothing like experiencing the physical brokenness of our existence to remind us that we can't really take care of any of it. When home remedies fail and parades of doctors and nurses have done all the poking and prodding and testing they can do without providing any real answers or help, when we have applied for every job we knew of and got not of them, then we are forced to confront the reality that nothing is really within our power - NOTHING. Like the crowds who followed Jesus, like the woman in Mark 5 who is described as having "had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was no better but rather grew worse", there is no good that we have and no help that we receive that doesn't come from God. He alone is the one who gives us "clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all that I have." He is the one who gives you your ability to think and reason and He takes care of all of it, not you. And He, not you, is the one who "defends you against all danger and guards and

protects you from all evil.” This is what we confess every time we say “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”

But far more than simply making sure we know that we need His help, God wants us to see His response to our need, a need which He Himself created us to have. We weren't independent from God in Paradise. Rather, we rejoiced in His abundant care and provision and, at least momentarily, were satisfied with the good gifts that He gave and said “Amen” to the things He withheld. God would have us know that He is still the God who cares for us. He is the only one who cares for us, even more than we care for ourselves. Jesus' compassion isn't some unique event or emotion in God. It is who God is eternally. He is compassionate toward our every need. He is moved deeply when He looks upon us and sees every level of suffering we endure - every ache, every loss, every hour of guilt and shame, every stomach that hungers for food, every body that shivers in the cold and has no place to lay its head.

But He is not just moved to emotional sorrow and empathy. That would be irrelevant and worthless. The Creator is moved to action because He alone can do anything about any of it. And what's more, it is His will to deliver you and bring an end to your suffering - forever. He provides you with the daily bread you need for your bodies not because He has to or because you deserve it, but out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy. You are His creation. He takes no greater joy than in providing you with exactly everything you need at the proper time. He gives what is good when you ask and when you don't and withholds what you ask for when it isn't the very best thing for you because He loves you.

He gives far more and better than we know how to desire or ask for. He gives Himself. He took on your flesh. The eternal and immortal God entered into your mortality and endured your pain, your sorrow, your loneliness, your agony so that He might suffer your death in both body and soul, as you are - not just out of curiosity, but in order to overcome all of your brokenness, spiritual and physical, in the resurrection on Easter - to swallow up death and suffering forever, to give you hope in the midst of this world of pain and brokenness.

You suffer now, but you will be delivered. That is God's promise. Your suffering will end either in this life or the life to come. But it is not eternal. It will not overcome you. And how marvelous that God does not allow the suffering of His children to be in vain. Suffering of any kind, even death itself,

in the hands of God, is turned into a blessing, a means by which He strengthens and keeps His children. In suffering He draws you ever closer to Himself by removing all earthly props. In suffering He stretches and deepens the roots of faith, drawing them further down into the rich soil of His promises. Jesus did this for the crowds and for the disciples, teaching them to trust in nothing but Him to meet their needs. He does the same for you.

And notice that His answer wasn't to take them out of the wilderness but to feed them in the midst of it. In trial and need we are left to cling to the one and only thing that is truly good and is the source of every other good and perfect gift - God Himself, our highest good. In this wilderness there is nothing else to look to for help but Jesus. And that's where He wants your eyes of faith firmly fixed. That is why He sends times of trial. Before the resurrection there must be the suffering and the cross. Your Lord has trod that road first and made it safe for you. Suffering is but exercise and death but slumber because Christ has sanctified them both in His own suffering and death. We must die before we can be raised. And we have. Like Tabitha today, we have already died to death in the waters of the font and been raised again to new life - a life that is safely kept in Christ. At the proper time we will see and know its full glory but now it is veiled under weakness and humility.

Blessed are we who struggle and suffer and endure crosses now. These are the loving work of God to keep us safe from any false hope in the things of this world, including our own flesh. Blessed are we as we consider the Lord's great faithfulness and rejoice in His abundant and eternal blessings. Let us clap our hands and shout with great joy to God who has spread before us in the midst of our wilderness the great and miraculous feast of His own Body and Blood crucified, risen, and now given to you. The Holy Communion is God's promise of the eternal life free of all suffering which we will one day enjoy. Come. Taste and see that the Lord is good to you in the very midst of your suffering.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.