

Pentecost 17 – September 24, 2023
Text: Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30
Theme: Bring on the Suffering!

As a parish pastor, a hospital chaplain, and a police chaplain, I have spoken with many suffering people who are almost despondent because they feel as though they are suffering because God has abandoned them. They might be suffering from a mental illness, a physical illness, or a spiritual illness. But no matter the cause or the category of suffering, suffering hurts, and when you are suffering, it becomes easier to believe Satan’s lie that you are all alone in this life. Of course, some take their suffering in stride and chalk it up to the norm for life in this world. Some, however, take offense at their suffering. They feel cheated that God would allow them to suffer, because they have tried really hard to be good people and if God is a loving God, why would he let them suffer this way? It seems completely unfair to them that they should suffer when they have tried to do everything God requires of them.

I do not minimize their suffering. Sometimes it is substantial and sometimes it might seem trivial, but when you are the one suffering, it hurts and it really doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks about the level of your suffering. Likewise, it is hard not to be irritated that all the good you have done seems to count for nothing. It is easy for one to become despondent and just stagnate in his suffering, downing in their pity pool. St. Paul helps us in this quandary.

St. Paul was a powerful Christian. Granted, he had a rocky start as a Pharisee, but he eventually got it all together and became the 13th Apostle by the grace of God. God reached through his spiritual darkness and physically blinded him with magnificent light. Yet, Paul had no illusions that life would be easier now. He knew from the start that with Satan as your enemy, life would become significantly more difficult. In his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul writes to them from prison.

Paul is not afraid of prison or even execution. His only concern seems to be whether his work here is completed yet. He would rather be with Christ in Heaven, who wouldn't, but he doesn't know if it is time yet. None of us do. The day of our deaths was set the moment we were conceived. We don't know when our death day is but we do know that the Lord has given us work to do until that day comes. And we know that we will be opposed by Satan until that day comes. He will take every opportunity to distract us, derail us and otherwise lead us away from the cross because he knows that the cross is what gives us our power. If we know nothing else, we know that Satan will oppose us at every opportunity.

But we also know that God walks every step with us through this valley of the shadow of death. It's complicated. We follow Jesus. Satan distracts us. The world tells us it's not Satan. It's normal. It's healthy. It's fun. It's your right as a human being to be and do whatever you

want to be and do. But what if God's Word says otherwise. What if God says that you are to be and do what he has made you to be and do? Isaiah makes it clear that we are not always going to understand it all. Sometimes, God's ways are beyond our ability to comprehend, but the suffering we endure is never for naught.

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Like the workers in the vineyard did not understand the master's plan for payment of the workers in the Gospel, so we can't always understand everything God does. But we serve Him for as long as He wills, some will serve for a long time and some for less, and His grace overflows to every one of us filling us up with His power and enabling us to do whatever he lays before us.

That might be prison like it was for Paul, but probably not for us, right? We are blessed by the protection our Constitution affords us, but that does not mean that there is not work to be done. We are still called to serve God even as we traverse this valley of death. Service will look different depending on your where and when, but I think, for us, it looks like standing up and being loud. I think it looks like conservative Christians refusing to be folded into the predominate cultural norms and saying what we believe, teach, and confess regardless of the consequences which might be mildly irritating or sometimes even

extreme. I think it looks like Bible-believing Christians running for local political offices and using our positions to speak up for Christ in a political system that is rarely friendly toward Christians. I think it looks like us retaking control of our schools and not allowing educational bureaucrats to tell parents and teachers what is good for our children.

It seems like a tall order. But we are able to do all of that because we know that the Master is with us. We are filled with His Word and Sacrament and that gives us the courage and the ability to stand just like St, Paul did in prison. Rather than complain about prison, he saw it as a greater opportunity to proclaim Christ.

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.” Likewise, for us, our currently woke society is not something about which to whine and complain. Rather, it is our opportunity in this place and time to proclaim Christ. Our generation is just as wicked and crooked as St. Paul’s was. But we believe what we believe because it is the Word of God, not because it is convenient or easy. God will give us the strength to serve Him. He will walk with us. He will lift up our souls when we are tired. And the gates of Hell shall never prevail against His Holy Church.