

## **Suffering, Compassion, and Christ**

It's clear from this morning's appointed texts that today's theme revolves around suffering. Even if you've never had to grieve the loss of a loved one, we can all relate to suffering. (These past several months haven't exactly been a vacation, right?) We all suffer. ***Can your faith be shaken during trying times? Absolutely!*** In fact, it can be very difficult to believe in the power and compassion and love of God when you've been brought so very low and you feel the weight of the cross you've been given to bear. "Why, God? What have I done to deserve this?" I'm reminded of an article I read a while back about an inscription that was recently discovered in one of the infamous Nazi concentration camps of WWII. Some poor Jew carved into the wall of their cell, "If there is a God, He will have to ask for my forgiveness." I don't think anyone of us has ever felt that low, but no one here can deny that we haven't at least ***doubted or questioned*** the wisdom of God. No one here can deny that we haven't felt at least a little ***undeserving*** of the misery we're made to endure, especially during these past several months. No one here can deny that we haven't at least looked to God during this trying time and wondered ***why we're being punished***.

Why did Jesus raise the widow's son? Luke answers the question very plainly: Because He had compassion on her. ***Understand: That doesn't mean that He merely felt sorry for her.*** No. He loved her. Her pain *splagnizomai'd* Him; that is, it tore His insides up. It was a very visceral, heart-rending feeling. His divine compassion—His love—***can't help but act.*** Jesus—God's love and compassion in the flesh—reaches out and stops this somber procession. The Lord of Life reaches out and touches the unclean; the dead...***out of His great compassion and love.*** No mask. No social distancing restrictions. No fear. Just love. He reaches out and shows, not just the mom but everyone present, **who is in charge.** Death doesn't have the final say. "I am the resurrection and the life."

Luke tells us that the resurrection of this young man caused the **whole crowd** to erupt in praises of thanksgiving. They feared and glorified God as a result of this mighty sign and wonder. "A great prophet has risen among us! God has visited His people!" And this report, as Luke says, spread all throughout the surrounding region. EVERYONE was hearing about the Lord of Life and His compassion...all because of a funeral! Think about that. We're still hearing about this today. Some 20 centuries later (and 28 centuries later, if we include Elijah and that widow and the resurrection of her son), and we're still hearing about the divine compassion and almighty power of the Lord of Life. I wonder... we don't know the names of these ladies, nor do we know the names of their sons. They are all anonymous. Their names are forgotten to history, ***but their suffering is not.*** Would you be willing to endure suffering in anonymity if it meant that others would be brought to faith and/or strengthened in their faith and come to praise God

as a result of your suffering? Careful before you answer, because the fruits you bear may already be contradicting your confession.

Does God work all things for the good of those who love Him? Absolutely! Okay... even funerals? Even cancer? Even divorce and depression and chronic pain and illness and job loss and imprisonment? ***Even pandemics and insurrection and crooked politics and natural disasters? God is working these things for our good?!*** Yes! Now, I'm not going to get into the whole "God is NOT the cause of evil, but God does permit evil" thing. There's simply not enough time in the day. Besides, you know this already. But...maybe that's the whole point. We know the Truth of God's love and compassion...***and yet how often we forget.*** How often we hit a few bumps in the road; we get knocked out of "comfy cruise control," and then we lament and question and doubt, as if God made a ***mistake***; as if God fell asleep at the wheel or lost track of us. Worse yet, we begin to question God and His love for us. He had such compassion on the widow that He had to act. Why doesn't He show the same compassion to us? Why doesn't He act for us? ***Do something God!*** It's easy to praise God's compassionate mercy and love when things are going great in life. It's quite another thing, though, to give thanks to God for all His mercy, grace, and undeserved benefits when you're feeling the weight of the cross you're bearing at the moment.

I don't know what particular struggles you're dealing with right now. I do know that we all have them. We're all suffering to one degree or another. We're not going to compare scars either. (I say this because somebody is always quick to point out how their suffering is so much worse than everyone else, and no one could possibly relate, as if Job himself would thank God that he wasn't in their shoes.) Maybe your sufferings aren't as bad as others. Praise God! Maybe things are even going great for you; not a worry in the world...right now. Hey... praise God! Then again... maybe you've never felt worse. Maybe you've never felt more forsaken or all alone. Maybe you really are giving Job a run for his money. ***Praise God(?)*** Whatever your situation may be, your reality—your Truth—before God is the same ***no matter what.*** Whether you're up or down, richer or poorer, in sickness or fear of sickness or in the greatest of health...whatever, you are a sinner who needs saving. Apart from Christ, you, o child of Adam, are dead in your sin. But...because of Christ, you are redeemed. Because of Christ and in Christ, you have been saved.

Look up from your belly button. Look up from your own personal pity party. Look to and focus on the cross of Christ. Here is the compassion of almighty God, on full display for all the world to see. God so loved the world; God had so much compassion on this fallen and sinful and evil world, that He sent His only-begotten Son to ***trade places*** with us; to take our place in death so that we may have everlasting life with Him in heaven. It's sad that it often takes

something tragic to wake us up and get our attention; to get us lined out and turned around and focused on Christ. It's incredibly sad that we often don't recognize or acknowledge God's compassion and mercy until *after* the tragedy has struck. And even then, do we truly recognize it...*or do we blame God for it?* Do we recognize the compassionate love and mercy of God when our prayers and desires aren't being answered/met the way we want them to be?

Folks: Here is God's love and compassion, right here and right now...**ALWAYS**. And God didn't wait for you to cry out to Him before doing something about your sinful condition. God took the initiative. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still dead in our sin, *Christ died and rose again for us*. His great compassion and divine love led Him to the cross to suffer our justly-deserved punishment, long before we even knew there was anything wrong. And this divine compassion *continues today*. It's not a "one and done" type of thing that happened one Friday a long time ago in a distant land, far, far, away. No! God's loving compassion still reaches out to you today, *His gentle touch calming and halting the chaos we call life*. No mask. No social distancing fears. He reaches out and gently stills us, assuring us, drying our tears. This is why we "sabbath." This is why we rest; so that the Divine can serve us and comfort us and nourish us and heal us with His Word and Sacrament. It is finished, in Christ and because of Christ. Be at peace. No matter how bad things may seem, by virtue of our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, we belong to Him. Nothing and no one can ever take this away from us. The gates of hell will not prevail, so neither will pandemics or elections or angry mobs or cancer or depression or dysfunction or anything else...even death. We grieve, we suffer, *but we grieve and suffer in faith*. We don't grieve and suffer like those who have no hope.

Folks: Here is Christ! In the midst of all the suffering and chaos happening right now, in your life and in the nation, and in the world, here is the compassion of God, bidding you to come to Him and "*Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My body. This is My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin.*" **You're not going to get this anywhere else in Greenwood today!** God has visited His people. God *still* visits His people. Here He is! The Lord of Life reigns and rules in your very presence. Here is your joy! Here is your reason to rejoice, even as you suffer.

May this Good News; this Truth of God's unconditional compassion and mercy and peace, be witnessed in all that you say and do. May your report of this great and undeserved compassion *reach out and go out* to all those whom God brings you into contact with, and may the ever-present reality of God's compassion and love for you guard you and keep you in the one true faith, now and into all eternity.

**AMEN**