

WHY SUFFER?
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
March 12, 2006

The gospel lesson this morningⁱ has Jesus explaining to his disciples that he'll have to undergo great suffering and that if anybody wants to become his follower, he or she must also take up their cross. Why does suffering seem to be at the center of Christianity? Look at the central stained glass window of this church. Why would that make this religion appealing? In fact, many people leave Christianity because of suffering: "What kind of God could have let my loved one die?" they ask. "What could possibly be blessed about being poor and oppressed?" "What's the use of being good when bad things happen to me and the wicked prosper?" Others, though, have found Christian truth and meaning through suffering, or have discovered with gratitude that powerful resources are available to them within the tradition to deal with the anguish and torment that are inevitably part of life. Let me tell you an extended story of a friend of mine to answer the question "Why suffer?" His story has been published, so I'm not revealing any confidences.ⁱⁱ

Robert Jonas had two healthy children, but lost his third -- a daughter who was born prematurely. He was utterly devastated. His Christian faith didn't provide much solace at first, but over the months which followed, with help from friends and family, his faith changed and deepened. Not only did he come to terms with his daughter's death, but he redirected his own life, and it became more fulfilling than he could have ever imagined.

Jonas, as he prefers to be called, grew up in a strong Lutheran culture in Wisconsin. Some of his earliest memories are of his grandmother's bedside prayers, said both in German and

in English. By the time he went east to any Ivy League college, though, Jesus had lost a lot of power for him, although he never entirely lost his faith. In the early 1990's, Jonas remembers feeling depressed and unsure about his teaching career. Yet, everything dramatically changed when he learned that his wife was expecting their third child. In the second trimester of pregnancy, medical tests indicated a girl, and they decided to name her Rebecca. Jonas wrote in his diary: "Even though I am tired and was sick a lot this past winter, I feel optimistic... Our lives are graced, as if the rails have been greased, and everything good is rolling along through us without resistance." However, his daughter was born over three months premature, weighing less than two pounds. Her statistical chances of survival were between five and ten percent.

Jonas first saw Rebecca two hours and a half after her birth under the bright, hot lights of the premature infant intensive care unit. She was spread-eagled on a white blanket with IV needles stuck in her right leg and left arm. Her left lung had "popped" from the artificially-provided oxygen that was necessary to her survival. The pediatrician had explained: "We'll do everything we can to save her, but in the end it depends on her, whether she has the physical strength to pull through this crisis. We'll just have to wait and see what is in the cards for her." Jonas brought his face near hers, stroked her forehead and said, "It's your daddy." A nurse standing nearby asked him if he wanted to baptize her. Jonas was shocked. "Pardon?" he asked. The nurse repeated the question and he found himself instinctively saying yes. A minute later she came back with a glass of water.

Of course, he didn't know what he was doing. He wasn't an ordained minister or priest. "Is there some official phrase for baptism?" he asked himself. He couldn't remember. "By what power can I do this?" He didn't know, and he really didn't care. So he just did what came naturally. He dipped his right thumb in the water and then brushed it lightly over the soft skin of

her forehead, making the sign of the cross. He said, "I love you. Your mother loves you. Christ and God love you. God bless you and keep you. Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Then he tried to say the Lord's prayer, but he couldn't get through it, wanting to concentrate all his attention on Rebecca. If he was going to have only a brief time with Rebecca, he wanted to get as much of her as he could, remembering every detail of how she looked. He kept whispering in her ear, "This is your daddy. I'm right here. I love you."

Rebecca had been born by emergency Caesarian-section because her umbilical cord was being squeezed hard enough to cut off her oxygen. Margaret, her mother, was first able to leave the recovery room and see her after three hours of life, but by that time the doctor had indicated that Rebecca wasn't going to make it. For about forty-five minutes Margaret and Jonas held her, wrapped in a delicate cotton blanket before Rebecca died in their arms.

Her death forced Jonas to face ultimate questions in his grief: "How can I survive the pain of losing a child? Is life worth living? What is the meaning of life and death? If loving someone always ends in loss, what sense does it make to love?" For months after Rebecca's death, Jonas was on an emotional roller coaster: "I could never know ahead of time when I needed to cry. The feelings would suddenly strike in different parts of my body. Some days, the body was numb; on other days, body sensations flowed in eddies of intensity, pleasant and unpleasant, one after another. On still others, I lay almost paralyzed in gut-wrenching pain. In my mind's eye, I often saw Rebecca on the hospital table trying to breathe." He also experienced a lot of anger, often pounding his fists on pillows, beds and the ground, cursing and yelling "No!" in angry protest.

As the weeks passed after Rebecca's death, Jonas began to discover new dimensions of faith which became deeply sustaining for him. His discoveries originated from feeling totally

vulnerable and out of control; there were friends and family members who came around to support him and Margaret in ways he could never have imagined. For example, he was struck by something as simple as a colleague saying over lunch, "Please consider us as members of your community. We're here for talking, visiting, telephone calls, anything you need." Jonas realized that nobody had ever said anything like that to him before, or (more likely) he'd never allowed himself to acknowledge the need for such support from others before.

Through the attention and help of others he began seeing how small, fearful, and greed-driven his personal ego had been. Healing love was not his to possess or channel. It comes freely from others and ultimately from God by what Christians call grace. Yet, one has to be open enough to be willing to receive it, and then to let it pass through oneself to others who need it too. "Right in the heart of grief shimmered a field of grace," Jonas could now say. "I could stand in this field and look all around to see grace bringing new life everywhere. Or I could walk in the field and meet others, some of whom were also aware of the incredible miracle of life."

Jonas and Margaret started meeting other people who had lost their children. They felt an immediate, intimate bond with those parents, often spontaneously hugging and crying together as they told their stories to each other. Even though each parent's story was unique, the qualities of tender love and profound loss often seemed infinite and transcendent of the particular people involved. The depths of Jonas' and Margaret's personal grief opened into the presence of others who were grieving and then into Grief itself. Sometimes it seemed as if there was only one Grief, and Jonas wondered how very private emotions could connect him so intimately to other people and ultimately to all people and creation as a whole.

There were other Christian parents who described this by saying they were participating in the Body of Christ. The message Jonas came to articulate was this: "If we saw rightly, we

would see that our hearts participate in God's eternal heart and that our brief historical presence participates in God's eternal time." He began finding special meaning in the writings of a medieval Christian mystic named Meister Eckhart. Love lay at the center of Eckhart's teaching, but he explained that true love is always wounded and suffering, just as Jesus' love for the world was. To be alive, feeling, and loving, is to be mortally wounded, because life is always imperfect and broken in some way. The problem is not in undergoing pain as such, Eckhart wrote, but in clinging to private, self-pitying suffering that isn't surrendered to the universal Great Suffering symbolized in Jesus' passion on the cross but ultimately transformed by the perfect love of God the Creator for all of creation.

When Jonas was despairing after Rebecca's death, he remembers a cold, dark voice within him counseling: "Sure, you loved Rebecca. Your love feels as if it were the final truth, as if nothing could be stronger. But hope is deceptive and illusory. You will die, and that's it, period. People's personal love dies with them. Everything disappears without a trace. Feel your feelings or don't feel them, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters." As Jonas got to know Eckhart, though, another voice arose within him to challenge the cold, dark voice: "Wrong. Authentic love really participates in something greater, something that lives eternally. If we keep loving, right through death's doorway, new life springs up. But we must hold nothing back. To love in the presence of death is to cultivate divine humus, the ground that brings new life. And the ground is God, ever new. God brings all things into existence and receives them when they pass out of existence. Get out, Death! You have no power here anymore. You, death and You meaninglessness, are the ultimate illusions."

Over time Jonas realized that Rebecca's death had thrown open a doorway in his soul: "My little ego had thought that its self-centered view of things was the way things really are. But

suddenly I was standing in the midst of a great unknown Source from which proceeded all meaning, life and death. I couldn't see that Source directly -- my senses were mediating Something to me. But I trusted Jesus' and Eckhart's vision that this benevolent Something was really there, within me and among us in creation."

Jonas also learned that this insight came only in bits and pieces. Except for being open to it, he had no control over when and where grace would come. He described it as a matter of glimpses, morsels and touches in the dark: "In those graced moments I saw, heard, and touched everything -- fellow adults, children, cats, trees, rocks, rivers, pews, and pencils as extraordinary manifestations of God's presence. While the night and the pain remained, infinite Light and consolation poured into me and into everything and everyone around me. Just as Jesus' death on the cross had released the Holy Spirit into all things, earth's winds had distributed Rebecca's ashes and beautiful presence everywhere."

My own experience with people who've undergone a lot of suffering is that they often mature faster than their counterparts who haven't, as well as demonstrating considerably more empathy with others. It's also amazing how many of them at a later date claim to be grateful for their suffering, because it deepened them and helped them appreciate life so much more. My life was radically changed when my first wife left me, I developed an ulcer, and I began to burn out in my work. At first I certainly didn't see all that in a positive light. In fact, I felt as if I had fallen over a cliff into a void which had no bottom. However, as certain friends came forward and buoyed me up, I began to feel transformed. It led to a spiritual pilgrimage around the world, to a new conception of the legal work I was doing at the time, and to a happy new marriage which produced two wonderful children.

My ability to counsel people with marital problems, health problems and job difficulties improved dramatically as a result of my own experiences. The late priest, pastor and professor Henri Nouwen has written of the value of being a "wounded healer,"ⁱⁱⁱ one who's vulnerable and open to his or her own suffering in helping another. That doesn't mean seeing another's hurts as the same as one's own, or focusing on one's own problems when with another. Instead it means being compassionate, in the sense of feeling like this, in Nouwen's words: "I am your brother; I am your sister; I am human, fragile, and mortal, just like you. I am not scandalized by your tears, nor afraid of your pain. I too have wept. I too have felt pain."^{iv}

Psalm 22 in the Hebrew Bible, as read earlier in the service, teaches that "God has not despised or abhorred the suffering of the afflicted... He has not hidden his face from me, but heard when I cried [out] to him."^v The Christian notion of God as incarnated in Jesus is that of an ultimate companion who suffers along with us, feels our pain with us, and himself suffers terrible agony on the cross. So, why suffer? Because to suffer is to be human, to be in solidarity with other human beings, and ultimately to be transformed in love. "What wondrous love is this, O my soul...that... when I was sinking down, beneath my sorrows ground, friends to me gather'd round, O my soul."

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 8: 31-38

ⁱⁱ See Robert A. Jonas, *Rebecca: A Father's Journey from Grief to Gratitude* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

^{iv} Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 105.

^v Psalm 22: 24.