

**Sermon for Martin Luther King Jr. Day
Sunday, January 15, 2011
Faith Mennonite Church**

On Suffering and Faith

2nd Corinthians 4: 7-11

"Suffering and Faith," by Martin Luther King Jr. Published in *Christian Century* 77 (27 April 1960): 510.

Upon reading the draft of King's essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Christian Century editor Harold Fey urged him to include material drawn from personal experiences: "You have been maligned, arrested and detained. You were stabbed. You say nothing about such sufferings, which must surely have had some influence on your thought." King added these four paragraphs, but they arrived too late for inclusion in the article published on 13 April, 1960.

Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been arrested five times and 1960 put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near fatal stabbing. So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination. I have learned now that the Master's burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us.

My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.

There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly yet proudly say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God.

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The other day, I walked into the room of an 11 year old patient who has had over 30 surgeries in his life. He has experienced a lot of pain and disability. He and I have established a bit of a rapport over the past few years. When he is feeling really, really bad, he simply reaches out his hand for me to hold. When he feels pretty good, he is a lively, articulate boy. But I was a bit unprepared for what he said to me the other day. He told me he had gotten a fortune in his fortune cookie that said: ***Courage comes through suffering.***

"What do you think about that?" he said to me.

"What do YOU think about that?" I said, cagily dodging his excellent question.

"Well, I think it's not always true," said my spiritually wise patient.

We had a good talk. We named all the things suffering can make us feel: helpless, bitter, sad, mad, bewildered, alone. I told him about Martin Luther King's reflections on suffering which I had just found the day before. I asked this wise child how HE managed to keep his spirits up—not become bitter---from suffering. He said that he is “thankful”. Wow, I said, for what? For my friends and my dogs, he said.

In his words we heard this morning from the Christian Century, Martin Luther King Jr. reflected on his experience of personal suffering. And while we may hold differing views on the redemptive nature of suffering, we must respect the fact that for this man, unmerited suffering held the possibility of transformative power. I have thought often in the past few weeks about the fire-bombing of his home--it was fire-bombed twice--and the personal attacks on his own safety and the safety and well-being of his family. I have also reflected on his words to the sanitation workers of Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated when Dr. King acknowledges that he may not be going much further, he suggests he knows that his life may already be forfeited to his vision of justice and peace. His words reveal he is suffering the real truth that he is likely to die by violence, leaving his family and the beloved movement for human rights behind. His truthful acknowledgement of personal suffering and the bitterness it evoked that has made this complex and courageous man more human to me.

As a hospital chaplain, I encounter suffering almost every day. I was probably drawn to chaplaincy because of my own struggles with personal suffering. I have been angered by suffering. I have been deeply grieved by suffering. I have been despairing when faced with suffering. I have often struggled to find any spiritual meaning in it at all, yet I am always compelled with what sufferers have to say about their experience. I firmly believe that only the sufferer can impart meaning to suffering...that is, meaning should never be imposed upon the sufferer from another.

Today, I would like to share some reflections by a woman named Deborah Barrett, who has suffered several devastating experiences: the death of her young child to cancer, the loss of her father to a comatose condition that lasted 13 years, the betrayal of her husband, and the diagnosis of autism in her second son, born several years after the first son had died. She dared to write an article a few years ago called *Suffering and the Process of Transformation* for The Journal of Pastoral Care. What Deborah had to say astounded me and spiritually engaged me.

Deborah Barrett describes suffering as an experience of going into the night, into the darkness, into the nothingness of silence and waiting, of powerlessness, abandonment, and forsakenness. Through her words, one cannot help but envision the void, the nothingness before creation, the vast empty silence of a world not yet unfolded. Into that void speaks the soul's first words of lamentation: "Why?" And "Where are You, O God?"

Deborah writes:

Perhaps it is precisely in this forsaken place that we begin a new relationship with soul and with God. For the roots of the word forsaken mean "to seek out." Feeling forsaken is not the same as believing that God is dead or does not exist. That would be to abandon God. Forsakenness holds a different tension. Since we cannot be forsaken by a God who does not exist, forsakenness, in a sense, insists on God. Thus, in our forsaken state, we begin to seek God. Much as Job demanded answers from his God, we will not allow our God to abandon us. We insist that God be accountable. We seek God and, in doing so, open ourselves to finding God in unexpected places.

We ask, "Why?" We demand that God reveal the meaning of our suffering. Asking why, in this sense, opens the possibility of a larger reality. One person told me that asking why marks the beginning of the process of transformation.

From *Suffering and the Process of Transformation*, by Deborah Barrett
The Journal of Pastoral Care, Vol. 53, No. 4, Winter, 1999

It is in this courageous search for God, out of the dark chaos and unformed void caused by suffering, that God is finally acknowledged as Other. God becomes more than someone made in our own image, someone who at all costs will keep our present self intact. God is autonomous, can truly be hated and truly loved. God begins to be revealed in the most unexpected places and in the most awful situations. God is not just on our side, but on every side; not simply above us, but in us; not only within us and our limited human experience, but within every imaginable and unimaginable human condition. People who seek God out of suffering speak of losing ego and finding access to a source of energy and strength that is apart from them and yet completely trustworthy. Barrett says that in the process of transformation, "*we learn to honor ourselves (as God honors us). We learn not to betray ourselves. We reclaim parts of ourselves. We become more fully human.*"

And isn't that what Jesus of Nazareth did? He became more fully human. He died a horrible death in the midst of a people betrayed by one another and oppressed by tyrants. He was abandoned and forsaken. Yet, he sought God while he hung there by his arms, his chest collapsing with the weight of his body, slowly and excruciatingly cutting off air from his lungs. And while he hung dying, he demanded that God hear him, he used his last agonizing breaths for crying aloud in lamentation to the Holy Other. There was something about the way he died that would not die, would not be annihilated, would not go quietly into the night, would not be mute. There was something in the death of Jesus that gave birth out of the void and chaos to a group of people who would not be silent about his Love for the least, the forsaken and even for the enemy, even though it meant risking their own torture and death.

Deborah Barrett talks about the etymology of the word "suffering." The root of the word means "to carry; also to bear children." She suggests that "*within the roots of the word itself lies a feminine way of carrying and bringing forth new life.*" Does suffering bear the possibility of new life? Did Christ give birth on the cross? I believe we would have to confess that in its essence, this is the radical claim of our Christian tradition.

Likewise, the words we heard this morning from Martin Luther King give us insight into his transformative love, born out of his own suffering. King revealed that he had to seek a way out of bitterness. In his search, he made a choice not to let life-threatening violence and suffering harden his heart and turn others into enemies for him. He chose, through the grace of God and the solidarity of many, many people, to continue to offer a free space of liberation into which the oppressor was invited to enter. Through this personal transformation, Martin Luther King became more fully human. Martin Luther King Jr. did not have in mind only the liberation of his own people, but of all peoples. He did not consider liberation of the oppressed possible without the liberation of the oppressor. And this radical vision--this dream--necessitated a radical invitation to the oppressor to come close and to be free from the possibility of violent retaliation and harm. This invitation continued to be extended by the man and by the movement despite the violence, torture and murder that occurred against their own. Even more remarkable, the invitation continued to be extended in his name after his death, so that his vision and his dream lived on--and lives still-- long after his body was killed.

So what is our calling as followers of these beloved ones who sacrificed a serene and quiet life for suffering, for justice, peace and love of oppressor and enemy? If we are to look upon their suffering, as we are called to do in days of remembrance like Good Friday and Martin Luther King Jr. Day, then how can we leave them there? We must take the power of their transformative love out in the world with us. We are called, in the words of Henry Nouwen, to convert the hostis (the enemy) into hospes (the guest). We are challenged and called to be a hospitable people, offering solace and kindness, love and healing, hope and shelter to those who, like us, are human.

Many of you remember that our family experienced the fire-bombing of our garage in 1981, an act that was the culmination of a series of racially motivated acts of violence and intimidation. When we searched for a new home following the fire-bombing, we were extended radical hospitality by a perfect stranger named Michelle Raschke. She offered a place of safety even in the face of not knowing if the one who threw the fire-bomb would come after us. Her willingness to offer hospitality was healing, as was the response of brothers and sisters of Faith Mennonite who would not leave us alone in a space of danger, but shared it with us until we could leave. Such solidarity and radical hospitality kept my heart open to possibilities, to hope, to God in the midst of the horror and feelings of utter abandonment. The possibility of keeping the door of my home and my heart open had to be worked out in my life slowly, but Michelle's act of radical hospitality kept the possibility of being hospitable living in my heart as seed for the future.

Grappling with my feelings and profound bitterness towards the young man who fire-bombed our garage and threatened the life of our (then) infant son was much, much more complicated. For years, I simply hated him. I was in a conference on traumatic loss a number of years ago when I realized Gary will always be an uninvited guest in my life. He is someone with whom I will always share a relationship because his actions impacted and changed my life so profoundly. I can no more escape the reality of his presence in my life than I can escape the enduring presence of those who have loved me. It was in that conference that I began to think of Gary not wholly as the hostis...the enemy...but also as an (unwanted, unloved) guest.

This process of transformation continued when my own sons reached the age Gary was when he so violently entered our lives. And in my heart, this enemy, this unwanted guest, began to take on the shadow of someone's son--a lost son, no doubt, but a mother's son nonetheless. Something in my mother's heart was engaged by the heart-felt rendering of Gary as a mother's son. This grace is an uneasy truce with an unwanted guest, only approximating conversion, but a truce that allows both Gary and me to be more fully human in our story.

Does courage come through suffering, as my dear young friend asked the other day? I think not. I believe that transformation, though, may come through the sufferer's search for meaning and hunger for God's presence. Transformation is a new creation born out of suffering, out of our insistence on relationship with the Holy Other, who is not just on our side, but on every side; not simply above us, but in us; not only within us and our limited human experience, but within every imaginable and unimaginable human condition.

He needs you
that's all there is to it
without you he's left hanging
goes up in dachau's smoke
is sugar and spice in the baker's hands
gets revalued in the next stock market crash
he's consumed and blown away
used up
without you

Help him
that's what faith is
he can't bring it about
his kingdom
couldn't then couldn't later can't now
not at any rate without you
and that is his irresistible appeal

—Dorothee Sölle, excerpt from "When he came"