

The Son of Man Came Not to be Served, but to Serve

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Do you believe that people bring on their own suffering? We can all think of situations where it appears that, “Yes, that person is suffering the affects of their own choices or behaviors.” Thirty-some years ago when I began jogging as my form of exercise, I got so into it that I subscribed to Runner’s World for a few years. Article after article pounded the same theme: the worst enemies of good health and conditioning were smoking, excessive drinking, and a sedentary lifestyle, all of which can have very negative effects on one’s well-being and health. That fits into the assumption that people bring on their own suffering.

The mindset behind the people of the Bible was that God punishes the disobedient by sending disease, disaster, and death as his judgment and punishment. If someone experiences illness or injury, that would be a sign of God’s displeasure of that person. Vestiges of that kind of thinking are found in the minds of moderns, too, maybe even me and you.

In answer to the opening question, we can find evidence that in some instances people bring on their own suffering.

How strange it is, then, to read the Gospel text for today and to hear the Lord Jesus ask his ladder-climbing disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” He is, of course, referring to his suffering and death. He’s asking his disciples, “Are you willing to suffer and die with me?” Willing suffer? Willing be seen as being punished by the Lord God Almighty? What a preposterous question!

This is not the first time that Jesus tells his dense disciples that he will suffer and be killed, and he is the innocent One, the One with no sin, no disobedience or rebellion, and he is going to suffer. Doesn’t compute in the minds of the disciples. Three times prior to this occasion Jesus told his disciples of his coming Passion. In Mark 8:31 we read:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

We read in the verse that follows that Peter rebuked Jesus. Peter could not accepted what Jesus told them.

In Mark 9:31 we read:

The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him and three days after being killed, he will rise again.

The disciples respond in a manner somewhat similar to Peter's response, for verse 32 tells us, "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask." Their assumptions about life and what Jesus said were in conflict, and they could not hear.

Today's Gospel reading begins at verse 35 of chapter 10. Verse 33 reads:

See we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death...

Three times Jesus predicts his suffering and death. The record of the Gospels describe how Jesus suffered, was crucified, died and was buried. Not all suffering is the consequence of bad choices or destructive behavior.

The First Lesson for this morning from Isaiah is called the Fourth Suffering Servant Song from Isaiah, and in it we hear (excerpts from Isaiah 53):

...he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are
healed.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted...

...it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain

As we read these words, we think of the ministry of Jesus and say, "Jesus lived what Isaiah wrote." We will use the words of Isaiah to help us understand Jesus, the Suffering Servant of the Lord God. He calls us join him in voluntary suffering on behalf of others.

Instead of seeking privilege as did James and John when they asked Jesus for places of honor, Jesus told them, all the disciples, and us, "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45).

It's not only that some suffering is not the consequence of bad choices and destructive behaviors, but the Gospel also tells us that followers of Jesus are to take on the role of servant and suffer on behalf of others – because of devotion to Christ. It seems to me that one of the unspoken – and sometimes spoken – goals of people is to be comfortable, that and to be happy. Where do we get that in the Bible? We are called to be uncomfortable and find our happiness as a byproduct of being faithful to Christ. We're raised in that "pursuit of happiness" kind of thinking which seems to allow and encourage us to embrace the goal of being happy. And if we're not, life is a disappointment. Christ Jesus has a different message. "Happy are the poor in spirit; happy are those who mourn;

happy are the meek; happy are the peacemakers; happy are those who are persecuted” (Matthew 5:1-10). What a different message, a different vision of life and purpose!

Last summer Tina Griego’s column of June 20 in The Denver Post described the life of Mike Honeyman. She began her column this way:

A woman once met the mother of an infant with Down syndrome and the mother was anguished because she did not know if she could raise her baby and whether she could give her up for adoption. “Will you take her into your family?” the mother asked. The woman called her husband.

“What do you think?” she asked him. But what was going through her mind was: this is my husband of 23 years and together we had two sons, and over the years I asked him if we could adopt Bob, our foster son, whose mother had neglected him. And he said yes. I asked him if we could adopt Brenda who has Down syndrome and whose mother abandoned her. And he said yes. I asked him if we could adopt Laura, orphaned in Mexico. And he said yes. I asked him if we could adopt Jami, a child also born with Down syndrome. And he said yes.

Now I am asking him to adopt a fifth child (also with Down syndrome). Her husband paused, and then said: “Who’s got the crib now?”

That was 14 years ago. A year ago last summer, Ellie Honeyman died of cancer at 58 (the youngest two girls still at home, now teenagers). Today, Mike says, “A lot of people who knew Ellie knew she was worried about us. I just want them to know we’re doing OK.”

Tina concluded her column with this brief paragraph:

I once thought Ellie told me the story about Mike’s reaction to her phone call because she wanted people to know that what she accomplished she not do alone, because she thought Mike’s contributions might be overlooked and she wanted people to know his strength and generosity. But now I think she told me because she wanted Mike to know that. She was preparing him for her absence and she wanted to remind him of what he was capable of, as a man, as a partner, as a father.

Reading this column helps us to know him as a Servant, one who has taken on the needs of others, who has taken into his heart and home children who required much attention and love. This is the Christ like way, and in Mike and Ellie Honeyman we find a reflection of the statement of Jesus, “...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” Ellie was and Mike is a great person. Thank you Mike and Ellie for being like Christ to your children, and Lord God Almighty, help us to refrain from judging whose suffering is self-imposed and whose is not. Enable us to be your Servants, not seeking honor and glory but only to be your faithful disciples. Give us the courage in your name to take on the suffering of others Amen.

