

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 9, 2013 (7:30 AM, 5:00 PM)
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

With Suffering

My former colleague and mentor at the church of the Advent in Boston, Richard Holloway, wrote a book 30 years ago exploring human suffering as a great paradox, a mystery really. The AIDS epidemic had reached Boston and in those early days, many with the disease suffered greatly and died. We had our share of AIDS funerals at the Church of the Advent. Most of us experience some degree of suffering in this mortal life; some more than others. There is pain; there is evil; there is death. In recent days we've seen it again in the Oklahoma tornadoes and the tragic building collapse in Philadelphia.

The mystery and paradox of suffering is at the very heart of the gospel – Jesus' passion – the cross – his death. We never get far from the cross. In Luke's Gospel we encounter Jesus as a compassionate healer. Compassion means "to suffer with." Jesus enters into the suffering of others –the poor, the blind, lepers, paralytics, the dead.

Luke combines two stories of Jesus' compassion in his seventh chapter as a lead up in the narrative to John the Baptist's questions from Herod's prison, "*Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" (7:19). Jesus answers John's messengers, "*Go and tell John...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up...*" (7:22).

Luke was a physician who knew the pain, the illnesses we experience. Last week we heard about Jesus' authority of love as he healed the centurion's servant. Today we move from authority to compassion, with the great love God has for each of us.

Jesus knows how much this widow suffers – no husband, no security, no son – Death has taken her son; Jesus touches his body and transforms death to new life. Jesus gives the son back to his mother. We are reminded of the words from the cross, "*Behold your mother; behold your son.*"

Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Scotland, ends his chapter on Suffering with these words:

There is no answer to the problem of suffering, and there can be no answer for us on this side of eternity. A sufficient answer would require a minute recitation of all the facts of history and their connectedness, as well as a direct knowledge of the mind of God. Suffering will remain a tantalizing mystery and an enduring scandal to the passionate mind. There are no confident answers. Instead, we are given, if we can bear them sudden glimpses of inarticulate meaning, brief hints of the pattern beneath the chaos. What we get is poetry, not philosophy; music, not metaphysics. And those who can receive it find they can live without answers, for their eyes have seen their salvation. You can tell who they are, because they

*laugh with those who laugh, and weep with those who weep. You can also tell them by a kind of silence that pervades them and by their strong and grieving yet joyous compassion. They are the ones who have seen, though they can never tell what they have seen. That never matters, however, because those who suffer are not wanting words. It is silence they want and knowing in silence. The sufferers are God's little ones, specially dear to him because of their pain, and they know the ones who know. They know them by their silence.*¹

Jesus had compassion for the widow.

Jesus gave her son back to her.

Jesus is with those who suffer.

We are called to follow...

1 Kings 17:17-24

Galatians 1:11-24

Luke 7:11-17

¹ Richard Holloway, *Suffering, Sex and other Paradoxes*, Morehouse Barlow, Wilton, Connecticut, 1984, pp. 53-54.