

April 2, 2017

Introduction to Lent:

In the Sermon on the Mount, **Jesus** declares unequivocally:

“God gives God’s best to everyone: the sun to shine, the rain to refresh, the soil to supply nourishment. God gives unstintingly, always and everywhere, generosity without end.”

So what blocks our joy?

Our Sunday worship for the season of Lent continues to explore ***what blocks our joy***, with reference to the temptations in the wilderness, the Sermon on the Mount and the insights of The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World.

We began Lent looking at FOMO: Fear of Missing Out, and the Scarcity Model: Will there be enough for me? Each is a variations on the insecurities and obsessions that block our ***joy***.

The next week we saw that there are no shortcuts to serving **God** and no shortcut to sharing love, compassion and generosity which create lasting ***joy***.

Then we explored the way loneliness and envy separates us from **God** and one another blocking our ***joy***.

This week we review how suffering, adversity and hardship block our ***joy***.

When we recognize how our ***joy*** is blocked we can make choices and engage spiritual practices that free us to experience the ***joy*** that **God** intends for us. In the process our Christian life grows and deepens into ***joy***.

Matthew 4: 12-17; 7: 13, 14

Let's focus on *Joy* for a minute. We all know it. We have all experienced it. We all want more of it in our lives:

The *joy* of a new baby born into the family:

The *joy* of graduations; yours and family members.

The *joy* of reaching or surpassing life goals; and watching another generation achieve as well.

The *joy* of your 4 1/2 year old granddaughter's sleep over and the *joy* when she leaves the next morning.

The *joy* of helping others when no one else can: That sensation that grounds and resonates with the rightness of what we are able to offer.

It is that deep rising sensation of perfection in the moment.

We all know that sometimes *joy* is just in the air. And yet we also know it is so easily lost in the muddle of life.

When black South Africans finally obtained their freedom in 1994 their *joy* was palpable. Archbishop Desmond Tutu remembers seeing the lines of people who had waited for hours and hours to vote in the first democratic election. The lines snaked for miles. They don't any more.

The war years generation struggled through adversity and great hardships. They were hardened and strengthened through those painful experiences and yet they rejoiced in a newly forged peace. We take it all for granted today.

As parents we instinctively try so hard to protect our children and grandchildren from pain and suffering. But when we do, are we perhaps

robbing them of their ability to grow and learn from adversity? Are we not robbing them of the *joy* of accomplishment?

Whether we like it or not suffering is what makes us appreciate *joy*. The rights and freedoms that one generation struggled for and rejoiced in, become common place and assumed by the generation that follows. One generation rejoices while the next generation complains.

Suffering has a way of putting things into bold relief and can clarify what is really precious or important. **Jesus'** teaching in the sermon-on-the-mountain echoes this same truth.

As a young person I resented the last part of today's reading. Why does it have to be this way? Why does the gate have to be so narrow? Can't a loving God make the journey easier and the gate to abundant living wider? Why the hardship? Why the road less traveled? What's wrong with the wide and crowded roadway?

However time and a few congregations have taught me otherwise. Only through the hardships and adversities of life have I been able to understand this wisdom **Jesus** lived and taught.

Truth is our lives need to be refined, and usually more than we think. There is a lot of dross or slag tucked away in our assumptions and attitudes.

Our almost natural response is when we're hit, we hit back. However, when we have been refined, we don't just lash out '*tit for tat*'. Rather, we want to find out what it is that impelled this other one to do what he or she did. And so as painful as it might be, we put ourselves in the shoes of the other.

Spiritual refinement is like building muscles. No pain no gain. Deep down we grow in kindness when our kindness is tested. It is like the

necessary struggle of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. But we can't and shouldn't work out 24/7. I'm not talking about martyrdom here.

The Dalai Lama uses the phrase “*Passing through difficulties.*” (Emphasis on through). We often fear that suffering will engulf us, or that suffering will never end, and so we run from it at every turn. But when we realize that suffering too will pass, or as the Buddhists say that it is impermanent, we can survive adversities and hardships more easily.

We can even learn to appreciate the insights, refinements and deep meanings embedded in them.

We can come out the other side not embittered but ennobled.

We find ourselves entering by the narrow gate: Taking the harder path, the road less travelled and knowing the deep abiding *joy* that is found there.

To summarize: Spiritual refinement, growing in grace as we advance in years, weathering the storms of life, entering by the narrow gate, always involve taking suffering, adversity and hardship into our spiritual practices.

For example a fundamental premise of Tibetan mind training, or lojong, is to take whatever suffering and adversity we are experiencing into a meditative reflection and use it to help us grow and develop.

Let's say you have a difficult friend or family member. You can see this as a challenge to become more responsible, tougher and more resilient.

If you are in a car accident, rather than focusing on the damage to your car, you can be grateful that you were not harmed.

If you experience a financial crisis, you can see the experience as an opportunity to empathize with others who are going through similar hardship and expand your capacity for empathy and compassion.

As the Archbishop shared, there are some aspects of empathy and compassion that can only be discovered through suffering.

Here's a practice that you can do anytime you are facing suffering, adversity or hardship. There is a copy of this as an insert in the bulletin for home use.

Buddhist would call it **A Mind Training Practice.**

Christians would call it **Entering by the Narrow Gate.**

Follow your breathing inward to that prayerful place.

1. Think of where you are experiencing suffering, hardship or adversity.

Sit with it awhile.

2. Think of others who are experiencing the same situation.

In your mind's eye see others who might be in a similar situation or are perhaps even worse off.

Open up to them, feeling empathy and compassion for them.

3. How might this situation be useful to you?

What feeling or lesson is revealed in this experience?

What lessons can be learned?

How might this circumstance help you grow and mature as a person?

4. Feel grateful for the opportunity that this suffering, hardship or adversity has given you.

5. Say from your heart: "May my suffering spare others from a similar suffering."

Commit to use your suffering to alleviate the suffering of others.

What actions can you take to help to prevent others from experiencing similar suffering, or contribute to reducing the suffering of others?

Application for Today:

**Let us go in through the narrow gate:
Embrace the hard work of turning suffering into opportunity.
Allow hardship to expand our empathy and compassion.
And so, walk the road less travelled of warm-heartedness and
gratitude.**

A Mind Training Practice or Entering by the Narrow Gate.

Follow your breathing inward to that prayerful place.

Rest in the light and love of God's presence.

Think of where you are experiencing suffering, hardship or adversity.

Sit with it awhile.

In your mind's eye see others who might be in a similar situation
or are perhaps even worse off.

Open up to them, feeling empathy and compassion for them.

What feeling or lesson is revealed in this experience?

What lessons can be learned?

How might this circumstance help you grow and mature as a person?

Feel grateful for the opportunity that this suffering, hardship
or adversity has given you.

Say from your heart: "May my suffering spare others
from a similar suffering."

Commit to use your suffering to alleviate the suffering of others.

What actions can you take to help to prevent others from experiencing similar suffering, or contribute to reducing the suffering of others?

Now let us pray as Jesus taught us saying.....