

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 10th Sunday after Pentecost, August 18, 2019.

Perhaps the world's favorite deli sandwich is the BLT. And once you know what the letters stand for, you never forget the words behind the letters.

In our lessons today we have another sandwich, the FSF. Not bacon, lettuce and tomato, but faith, suffering, and more faith. A layer of suffering between outer layers of faith.

Let's take a look at this sandwich, and let's start with the interior layer, the layer of suffering. We get more than a hint of suffering in the passage from Hebrews (**Hebrews 11:29-12:2**): torture, mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, dressed in skins, destitute, persecuted and tormented.

Do we really want this sandwich? Is there any way that the two outer layers of faith compensate for the suffering described?

Well, the first thing to say is that we don't have a choice about the interior layer. Suffering comes with life. If we are alive, there will be times of suffering. Maybe not at the level described in Hebrews, but still a reality for all of us.

Here's the question then: Is there a way to address the suffering by surrounding the suffering with layers of faith? The answer for you and me in this place, and in synagogues and churches around the world, is yes.

Let's look at the first layer of faith. You and I believe in a loving God who wants the best for the Creation and all within the Creation, including you and me. We have faith that Divine love is at the heart of what God wants for us. This faith drives hope. Given the nature of a loving God, we hope that our life will be one of joy.

And, for most, if not all, there is joy. Maybe not constant, but certainly not absent. Our faith therefore seems justified. We recognize blessings. We count them, we thank God for them, and we share them.

But joy is not the only thing that life brings. Suffering also arrives at our doorstep. The level of suffering varies from person to person, family to family, country to country. No one - no family, no nation, no group - escapes suffering. And sometimes suffering is so severe that we want to toss the whole sandwich. The suffering is simply too much for us.

But wait. There is a safety valve. And that is another layer of faith. And somehow we gather the strength to call out to God, as in today's Psalm (**Psalm 82**):

How long will you judge unjustly, and show favor to the wicked?
Save the weak and the orphan, defend the humble and needy;
Rescue the weak and the poor; deliver them from the power of the wicked.

The short version is "Save us, O Lord." Not from suffering altogether, but from suffering as the final word.

For some, suffering trumps faith. But not for you and me. The second layer of faith trumps the suffering that goes with life.

A sandwich without suffering is not an option. But, a sandwich without the top layer of faith in God is an option. As is the bottom layer of faith. The function of the top layer is to prepare one with confidence for the suffering that will surely come, while the function of the bottom layer is to assure us that God is both in and beyond the suffering.

As people of faith, we do not deny that suffering exists. Rather, as people of faith, we claim that it is possible to grow closer to God through suffering. The whole point of the Crucifixion – suffering at its worst – is to make possible the Resurrection. You don't get one without the other. A painful lesson, but with a remarkable outcome. An outcome that puts a whole different face on life and death. It is the face of New Life.

In today's lesson from Luke (**Luke 12:49-56**), Jesus reviews the unhelpful thinking of those who doubt him. "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain.' And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat.' And so it happens."

But “so it happens” doesn’t have to be the final word. We can put “so it happens” – that is, suffering - in a sandwich of faith. Two layers of faith, one to prepare us for what is inevitable, and the other to assure us that we can not only endure the suffering, but grow from it and put it in its proper secondary place and find joy in doing so.

Now, this understanding of the relationship of faith and suffering gets tested regularly. The ability of suffering to undermine faith often seems stronger than the ability of faith to put suffering in its place. Suffering hurts, really hurts. Faith, on the other hand, is difficult to judge, in part because we don’t see it in the same way that we see suffering.

We know when we hurt. We can count the hours, the days, the years. Faith is more elusive, at least in its early stages. And it is elusive because most of the time we learn it from others. This is why it is important not to hide our faith, but to share it. When someone asks us “How are you coping?” our response should not be “I don’t know,” but some version of “I just know that God has my back.” From Jeremiah (**Jeremiah 23:23-29**): “Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?” Our answer: Yes, you are near by. “Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” Our answer: “No one can, Lord. You see all.”

Which is the truth, isn’t it? When we cope, we are getting help from somewhere, from someone, from something in addition to our own resolve, our own courage, our own stubbornness, our own toughness. For some, for you and me, there’s a name for this something, and that name is God. Others are reluctant to give this something a name. Maybe even insistent that there is no God, and therefore faith in such a God is foolish. But, fear not. That reservoir of help that sustains us through Suffering isn’t dependent on us or anyone else calling it by name. God’s choice, not ours.

Think of all the times in the course of your life when good things have happened when you didn’t expect them or pursue them. You wonder why, but you don’t have an answer. You’d like to say thank you, but you don’t know whom to thank. It’s a mystery. “Why me?” You might even say, “Thank you, God,” with an emphasis on the “thank you” more than on “God.” For people of faith, there is mystery, but it’s a Mystery with a capital M, which is really a capital G.

It's interesting that when bad things happen, we are quick to blame God. The object of our anger is clear. "God, you're supposed to be there, but obviously you're not. Thanks a lot. See if I talk to you ever again." Well, God can handle this response. God gets it all the time. God is used to it.

This conviction that God is always with us and for us and available to us and to others, is called Faith, with a capital F. And it is stronger than suffering, even when that suffering is at a level described in today's gospel, a level that merits a capital S. After all, there are two layers of Faith – one to prepare and one to sustain. Not just one layer. Two against one. I like those odds. I like that sandwich. FSF. Not as easy to remember perhaps as BLT, but stronger and more joyful.

Amen.