

Resisting the Itch

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at the Celtic Eucharist, St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, April 26, 2016

In the name of the God who re-creates, redeems, and sustains us through our darkest hours.
Amen.

Suffering. This world is rife with it. Most days I don't even want to look at or read the news. I'm tired of gun violence, this time in Ohio. I'm also tired of yet another person shot down because of the color of his skin, of sexualized violence against women and girls, of terrorist attacks, of disaster aftermaths such as the flooding in Houston and earthquakes in Ecuador and Japan. When I see footage or read details about these sort of goings-on in the world, my first instinct is to look to something else, something more pleasant. I want distraction. Even when things in my own life aren't going so great, I tend to reach for an escape mechanism—scrolling through my Facebook news feed, going away on weekend retreats around New England, or losing myself in the fictional world of the novel I'm revising.

When faced with the difficulties of life, we all tend to desire escape. We want a sense of peace and clarity to replace our feelings of anguish, fear, or confusion. So did the disciples in the Gospel story we just heard from John. Jesus is aware of the fear that already exists in their hearts, a fear—to be joined with anguish and confusion—that will magnify when he suffers and dies on the cross. So his farewell includes a wish for peace. But it is not the peace as the world understands it. It's not that escape we humans tend to want, a dodging of suffering which Buddhist nun Pema Chodron calls “scratching the itch.”

Peace for Jesus is not the absence of suffering. It is leaving the itch alone and seeing what happens when one gets past the desire to scratch. It comes from an inner security, a trust that God is with and in us and that we are in, and will be guided toward, the places we need to be. Jesus exemplifies this trust when he says to his disciples: “If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.” He won't try to escape his fate. He knows it's not an end, but a new beginning.

C.S. Lewis, in his 1940 classic *The Problem of Pain*, writes, “Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself” (pp. 24-5). And then, as told to us before the Gospel in Acts, “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.” Suffering is part of being alive. It's necessary for growth. It fosters compassion. It's how we find new life and fulfillment. Even Paul got up when stoned.

Jesus understood suffering and death of any kind begets new life. It takes incredible courage and faith to embrace this principle. What personal deaths do we need to suffer in order to reach a better and fuller life? What itches should we not scratch? What tired systems ought we crush? Whatever endings, whatever itches we ride out until they pass, may we find Jesus' courage to accept and grow through them and, in doing so, live into the peace, freedom, and fullness that God wants for us all.