

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Denying Ourselves, Taking Up Our Cross and Following Him

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Hi, I'm Emily Stimpson Chapman and today we're going to be reflecting upon what Jesus is asking of us when he calls us to pick up our crosses and follow Him. First though, let's pray. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and we shall be recreated and you shall renew the face of the Earth.*

So, I've been thinking a lot about suffering lately and not just because I have this talk to prepare. I've just had a lot of people I care about right now, who are carrying some pretty heavy crosses, and I have one or two of my own. This weight has been feeling particularly heavy of late. And as I've watched these people suffering, some are suffering with incredible grace and others are not. You know, the weight of the cross is crushing them. And so as I've watched them struggle, I've been wondering why some people seem to be having a harder time than others.

Part of what I've come up with, is that some people are just shocked to find themselves carrying a heavy cross, and even more shocked that they haven't found their way out from under it. I don't think there's more suffering in the world today than there was 200 years ago, but I do think fewer of us expect to suffer. Never mind what Jesus said about picking up our crosses and following Him. That's not what we see on social media. Like, you know, most would be brightly lit, highly edited images that we see on Facebook or Instagram. They don't depict suffering. They depict people living these full, happy and comfortable lives. They also suggest that if we only buy the right products, or marry the right man, or pray the right prayers, we too can have happy comfortable lives.

Science is also part of the problem, I think. I mean don't get me wrong, modern medicine is a marvel, it's amazing. In recent decades we have discovered cures and treatments that were unimaginable to previous generations, like even our grandparents. Diseases that once robbed families of children, like polio and scarlet fever, have been practically eradicated in the United States. Complicated surgeries, we can perform those with robotics, and chemotherapy and drug therapy can send all sorts of cancers into remission. For nearly every physical problem that ails us, from menstrual cramps to, I don't know, high blood pressure, some treatment exists that promises relief if not a cure.

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Yet, for all of the suffering that modern medicine has taken away, people still fall sick and die. We still sustain life altering injuries and no matter what science has to offer, it can't do anything to make the sufferings of our hearts go away. There is no pill that's going to fix a broken marriage. No surgery is going to bring back a departed loved one. And when you have bought into the idea that suffering is something you can escape from, if you just live the right way, or take the right vitamins, or see the right doctor, it can be a hard pill to swallow when suffering inevitably comes for you. And it will come.

The hard truth is that in this life, there is no one who escapes suffering. Doesn't matter if you're a follower of Jesus or not, you are going to suffer, like even the people with the brightly lit urban farmhouses and mid-century modern masterpieces on Instagram are going to suffer. Like scientists are never going to find a cure that's going to heal our broken human condition. In one form or another, suffering will find us all. Everybody in this life is going to get one or more crosses that feel unimaginably, unbearably heavy. It is almost like the Oprah show, except it's not toaster ovens, it's like you get a cross and I get a cross and we all get a cross. Yay, right? Anyhow, once we recognize that, the question for us becomes not how can we avoid suffering because we can't, but more fundamentally, how do we handle suffering when it comes. How do we carry our crosses and follow Jesus without losing hope, and how, while doing that, do we become the men and women God made us to be.

I'm going to start with the obvious. When suffering comes your way, you don't have to pretend that it's not suffering. Okay? You don't have to pretend that the cross isn't heavy. You are allowed to tell Jesus that it hurts. You are allowed to cry and struggle with the fact you are going through something very, very hard. Anger, resentment, bitterness, like all of the complex and confusing emotions that we feel when we are suffering - that comes from a belief that it's not supposed to be this way. That we were meant for something more and something better. C.S. Lewis who's getting at this when he asked, "How could an idiotic universe have produced creatures whose mere dreams are so much stronger and better and subtler than itself." Simplest answer is it couldn't. All right? We dream the dreams our creator wants us to dream. We long for what our creator made us to long. And that is peace and joy and wholeness and life forever with the people that we love.

Suffering, for as terrible as it feels, is a perpetual witness to the goodness of God, the goodness of the universe, and the goodness of the life for which God made us. We were not made to suffer, we were made for joy. And the fact that we have to suffer is not something you have to do back flips over. If you want to, more power to you, but it's natural and it's normal to struggle with suffering. All of which is to

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say, don't beat yourself up when you stumble under the weight of your cross. It's normal and it happens. So, that's clear, right? Carrying your cross does not mean denying the reality of suffering.

But what does it mean? It means choosing to love in the midst of your suffering. St John Vianney had this great way of talking about suffering. He said there are two ways we can suffer. We can suffer with love or we can suffer without love. And I think that is the best guide there is for us when we're trying to figure out how Jesus wants us to carry our crosses and follow Him. He wants us to suffer with love, not without love.

Now, to suffer without love, according to St John Vianney, who's smarter than me, is to resent the crosses that God permits to come our way. It is to fear them and run from them and ultimately to reject them. And we can do that, God permits us to say no to some crosses and he also permits us to grow bitter with others. But when we do that, we don't get a cross-free existence. Nobody gets that. Instead, we just get more crosses. Crosses that are heavier and more unwieldy than the ones that we first rejected.

On the other hand, to suffer with love, is to recognize that through suffering God draws us closer to Him. Our crosses when we accept them with love can be constant reminders to us of our need for God, of our own limitations and our weaknesses. They also can be teachers. They can teach us to trust God even when it hurts, to be patient and wait for God's plan to unfold, and to persevere even in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Just so we're clear, God doesn't give us crosses. Crosses come because we live in a fallen world but God does permit crosses and He uses them. So when we call upon Him and his strength for help, enduring whatever suffering we're facing, God pours his grace into us and that grace purifies us. It frees us from attachments that could lead us away from God and it prepares our hearts to enter into eternity with Him.

This is why St Therese of Lisieux could say that suffering is the very best gift God has to give us. Even more importantly, suffering with love means suffering with Christ on the cross. It's not just leaning on Him but accepting suffering for love of Him. It is saying, "Yes, Lord, I will take this on. Yes, Lord, I will suffer with you and for you. Yes, Lord, I will do whatever you want me to do out of love for you and I know you will use this suffering to help others."

You see, when Christ suffered on His cross He didn't just redeem the world, like that would have been enough but He also imbued every single human cross, every single human suffering with the capacity to be a participation in His cross and His suffering. So, when we pick up our cross and when we bear it with love we

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become Christ coworkers. We help Him heal this broken, hurting world. This is what St. Paul was getting at when he said that we complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Or, also what the catechism is talking about when it says that in suffering united to Christ's passion becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus. So, in other words, the goodness and love of God is so great that even the fruits of evil can become things of beauty. Through God's gracious permission, suffering, lovingly and willingly endured, becomes blessing for us and for others. It becomes the means by which grace enters into this world and renews it and strengthens it and redeems it.

Because of all that, we need to pray for the love of our crosses. That love is what makes it possible to do what so many of the saints did and have great joy even in the midst of great sorrow. And this is also why in addition to praying for our crosses, the church calls us, especially in lent, to practice voluntary penances. It's through moderate mortification, like fasting from sweets, rising when the alarm clock rings, our complaining tongue, through that our bodies and souls acquire the habit of accepting trials and offering them to God. You can think of it like spiritual cross training. You know, voluntary mortification strengthens us so we can deal with all of the involuntary mortification with love and grace. But, make no mistake, suffering with love is a grace. Okay? But it's a grace that we can receive more easily when we practice.

Ultimately, suffering with love and carrying our cross with love – it comes down to obedience. It's obeying God, in good times and bad, and trusting that He is in charge, that He has a plan, that He knows what He's doing and it's good. It's not bucking God or defying God, but bowing our heads in loving submission to His providence.

And I know when I say the word obedience, like red flags go off for some of you. Obedience gets a bad rap in our culture. It's thought of something as, you know, oppressive ruler's and the patriarchy and evil spouse's demand. We also tend to celebrate heroes who are disobedient. You know, renegades who defy power and stick it to the man. Even when we're talking about Jesus we do this. Like, we can find ourselves emphasizing how he broke with tradition and befriended women and castigated Pharisees and dined with the prostitutes - and He did. Like, He did do all those things but that's not why we have the hope of eternal life. We have the hope of eternal life, not because Jesus was disobedient but rather because he was obedient. And in everything Jesus did, obedience to his heavenly Father came first. He said it: He came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He came not to do His will but to do the will of the Father.

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And that obedience, like it came at a cost. You know, it meant suffering, it meant stripes on His back and thorns in His head and nails on His feet. But that's often the way of obedience. It isn't easy. It requires discipline and sacrifice and grace. It might mean losing something we value, whether that's success or the opinions of others, or relationships, or even our lives.

But for us, as for Jesus, obedience is how we show our love for God. Right? ***"If man loves me, he will keep my word,"*** that's what Jesus said. So when we say yes to the crosses that come our way, when we choose not to turn away from God in our suffering but to invite Him into it, we learn to love through obedience. We learn to unite our hearts and our minds to Jesus on Calvary. We learn to hang there with Him from the cross offering up our pain for the healing of the world. And that's not just following Jesus, that is being conformed to Him. It is becoming like Him. And that is how we get to heaven, and that is how we help all those we love get there as well. That's why the saints say that suffering is a gift. That's why they urge us to listen to Christ and pick up our crosses and follow Him and that is why Jesus told us to do the same. Because that, like the way I've suffered, the way of the cross, the way of Jesus, is the way that leads to life. And there is no other way.

Let's pray. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear Jesus, thank you for your willingness to suffer on behalf of us and to suffer to give us life. We pray for the grace and the strength and the peace to suffer as you did and to join our sufferings with you. We pray this in your name. Amen.*