



# + • ○ TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023, Easter 5**

## **The Wounded Healer by Rev Dr Jordan Redding**

*For it is a commendable thing if, being aware of God, a person endures pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."*

*When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. 1 Peter 2:19-25*

*"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10:11-15*

This week, we continue in First Peter and come to what is perhaps our most challenging reading yet. And that's because of who it is that Peter is writing to at this point and what it is he's writing about. He's writing to slaves within the early church. And he's talking to them about suffering under their masters.

And his advice to them is essentially, *suck it up*. "Be subject to your masters with all respect," he says. And not only the kind and gentle masters, but the dishonest and cruel masters as well. Be

subject to them, he reasons, because if you suffer for doing good then that's commendable before God.

I've found that advice immensely challenging for a couple of reasons: the first is that Peter's words seem to – or can be interpreted as endorsing slavery. And we know that they have been used by the church in the past to endorse slavery.

In the face of injustice, can this passage not be used as a form of social control by saying to those who are subjugated and oppressed: *suck it up*, because your suffering is commendable to God?

So that's the first reason. The second reason I struggle with this passage is because it feels to me like it trivialises – even fetishizes – suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth. That may be true that growth comes through enduring suffering, but for anyone who is in the middle of a difficult period it can be incredibly unhelpful to have someone try and explain your suffering away as a spiritual discipline. The last thing you want to hear is that your suffering is somehow commendable to God. That it's actually a gift in disguise or a test that God's given you.

All this to say, we need to hold this passage very carefully. It's as important to say what we *don't* believe Peter is saying, as what we *do* believe he is saying.

I don't believe we can or should use this passage to silence people suffering from injustice – particularly for those of us who are socially and economically privileged. And I don't believe we should use it as pastoral advice for people in the midst of suffering.

... so if that's what Peter *isn't* saying... what *is* he saying?

Well, I think he's saying a number of things, but I'm going to focus on just one today. And that is, I believe Peter is inviting us as followers of Jesus not to shy away from our suffering. But rather to sit with it. Learn from it. Grow in it.

Why? Because *Christ* suffered. We're told that through his suffering at the hands of others, God's resurrection life has come into the world. In Peter's words, by his wounds, we have been healed. Inexplicably, at the heart of the Christian narrative – and at the heart of our passage today – is an *incredibly challenging* claim that God will meet us in the midst of suffering and there get to work bringing about healing and new life.

...there's a promise here for us. Not that our own suffering will miraculously go away or that justice will miraculously be done (I'm not saying miracles don't happen, but that's not what Peter's concerned about here). The promise is that as we follow Christ on the path of suffering, we ourselves may become sources of God's healing in the world for others.

Peter's reasoning is this: if by Christ's wounds, we have been healed, then it follows that *by our wounds others may be healed*. Just as Christ is *the Wounded Healer*, so we are to become wounded healers in him. Familiar with our own woundedness so that his healing and new life may come through us.

In other words, for Peter it's precisely as broken, wounded people, that we become vehicles of God's resurrection life *now*.

Such an invitation to enter into our suffering, to take it seriously, to see it as a source of healing in the world, is a radical claim – because our human instinct understandably is to avoid pain.

We have proven ourselves to be very innovative in finding ways to avoid pain. Addictive substances such as drugs and alcohol which dull pain have been around as long as human civilization. And we continue to find new ways to dull the pain.

Today, perhaps the most addictive substance is not drugs or alcohol – but technology. It's well documented that social media and online streaming services are designed to be addictive, to capitalise on our unhappiness, and to fill the void with dopamine hits. We dull the pain through endless distraction and instant gratification.

But all the signs point to the fact that – as with most addictions – far from being a cure to the pain, our obsession with technology as a means of dulling the pain ends up making things worse. It's like our inner wounds are being ignored. Left untreated to fester and grow.

When I worked as a chaplain at the university, the mental health services were always full to bursting, unable to keep up with demand. We were seeing a rising tide of young people who were desperately unhappy and didn't know what to do with all that emotional pain.

I remember one counsellor lamenting that more and more young people lacked the skills to process ordinary human emotions like sadness, boredom, loneliness, grief. In a culture of instant gratification, these harder experiences of human life become something to be avoided, fixed or solved. A void that needs to be filled. A sickness that needs to be diagnosed. A cure for the pain.

And while these issues are particularly acute among young people who have grown up in the age of facebook, instagram, and tiktok – older generations are affected as well, albeit in different ways.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that dulling or avoiding pain is always bad. By no means. Through discoveries and developments in technology, medicine and psychology, crippling, chronic and dehumanising pain can often be diagnosed, managed, even cured. This is a wonderful gift. A life-enhancing and humanising gift. To be embraced.

But what I am suggesting is that our society's obsession with avoiding pain at all costs is unhealthy. Especially considering that suffering, pain, weakness and death are universal human experiences. Sooner or later, we have to face them.

There's a Dutch Catholic priest and theologian called Henri Nouwen. And he was known for his contemplative theology and for his work with people with disabilities, wrote a book called *The Wounded Healer*.

And his basic point is that, in a society addicted to dulling and avoiding pain, one of the surprising gifts we have to offer to the world as followers of Jesus is to embrace our woundedness and to help others to embrace theirs. In short, to become wounded healers.

After all, there's no avoiding it in Christianity. The cross – a symbol of suffering and death – stands at the centre of our faith. To follow the crucified one is to follow that path of suffering knowingly and to trust that God will meet us in it, working healing and new life.

How so? I was in conversation with a friend recently who was recalling a time of grief at the loss of a loved one. He reflected that, at the time, he wanted to comfort his friends in their grief but, because he hadn't processed his own grief, his ability to be there for his friends was severely limited. It was too painful for him to expose himself to the grief of his friends.

The more he familiarised himself with his own grief – made friends with it as it were – the more he was able to be fully present with his friends and comfort them in their pain. It was as if he was a few steps further along the path of grief than them and so he was able to turn and guide them as they followed behind. In short, his woundedness became a source of healing for others.

I think my friend's experience resonates with what Henri Nouwen is talking about in his book. Through familiarising ourselves with our own suffering – through walking that path knowingly and

consciously – we become a blessing for others, learning to empathise and walk with them in their pain. In short, the cross stands as witness that God in Christ is in the midst of our suffering transforming all our woundedness into a source of love.

A closing image. Today is the closest Sunday to the Pasifik Day of Prayer. The theme for this year has come from the *Kanak* people in New Caledonia. They've given us this indigenous concept of "*Do Kamo*", which is best translated as the "authentic" or "true" human being. And *Do Kamo* is a vision for everything flourishing human life entails.

And what the Protestant Church of Kanaky New Caledonia have done, is they have applied this indigenous concept of *Do Kamo* to Jesus Christ. In other words, if we want an image of true, authentic humanity, we look to Jesus.

It's a profound image. In our culture of instant gratification and aversion to pain, we might imagine the *Do Kamo* as this young, beautiful, successful, happy human being untouched by age, pain, and weakness. But if Jesus Christ is our *Do Kamo* then to be truly and authentically human involves becoming familiar with our pain, our sadness, loneliness, grief – not denying them. For there's a promise that through them we become more authentically human, learning to love as God in Christ loves us.

Amen.