

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Where Do We Go With Our Suffering?"  
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Proper 22

It has been said that the two most certain things in life are death and taxes. I suppose we could lengthen that list in many respects. But today as we talk about the Scriptures we have read, as well as speak briefly about our visiting you here today, and the vital importance of what we receive at the Lord's Table, I would also add to death and taxes, pain and suffering.

Like some of you, I've had the privilege of visiting in hospitals for at least thirty years and for most of that as a church leader. I'm wondering if you have had the same struggle that I and many others have had in facing my fears as I visit in the hospital. Some people are so afraid of facing their own pain, losses and suffering that they cannot go into the hospital building.

But as we face our pain, and our losses, we come face to face with God. In fact, it has been argued that our maturity in life is directly related to how well we face and process our losses. So when we read the story of Job, we read it with amazement at several levels. We read God being so proud of Job and Job's devotion to God that he allows him to suffer in a kind of a bet with the devil. Now some might read this and begin say, "Why should we trust God, if he likes us so much and then, somehow, if God really likes us, God will allow us to go through more suffering, perhaps even more than we think we can bear?"

But I don't read the story that way. It is true that Job has a very strong relationship with God. It is true that God allows suffering to come into Job's life. But I hear no glee in God's voice at this, while I do hear it in the devil's mouth. The story is more about where we go with our suffering. Where do you go with your suffering?

We hear in the story where Job's wife goes with what is happening. She acknowledges that God is letting this happen. She feels how unfair it seems. She just wants it to stop for him. She suggests he curse God and die, thus putting his suffering to an end. Today, advocates of euthanasia also suggest assisted suicide and suicide. While suffering is a complicated topic, what we do know is that deciding to disagree with God and to agree with death, is not the best solution. Nor is it fair for us to be hard on Job's wife, it could

have been the voice of his friend, or a child or a relative, simply desiring relief from his painful situation. But Job chooses well.

He decides to not turn his back on God, but rather to engage in a lengthy debate with God and his friends about justice and fairness when it comes to suffering. When this debate is finished at the end of the book, Job is commended by God and his friends are reprimanded. Turning to God in our suffering is a good choice, as early in life as possible.

I know it is a difficult choice. I am a migraine sufferer and have often visited Emergency Rooms across the country with this condition. I also once fell asleep under a sun lamp and woke up with second degree burns all over my face and chest. We all have stories of experiencing pain and suffering, some severe and chronic, some less so. But all of us feel both pain and loss. We have lost parents and children, friends and neighbors, under many circumstances.

And we experience change, here at the Kirk and at St. David's and in our workplaces and in our homes. We cannot avoid it. It is as inevitable as time itself. So pain and loss and change happen. But where do we go when we experience it?

Part of the beauty or attractiveness of our Presbyterian system of church government is that it not only allows us to help each other at regular intervals as congregations, it gives us outside help in the form of a Presbytery, which is made up of our own people, i.e. representatives from the Kirk, as well as representatives from the other congregations in the region. And in small presbyteries, such as our own, we often seek outside help to bring better perspective on our individual congregations, so we have Kenn with us today, who is one of our workers employed by the Synod of the Atlantic provinces. We take time to help gain renewed positive perspective on what is going on here, because sometimes we can't really see what is happening because we are too close to it to see it.

We celebrate with you in the \$1.7M raised and used to renovate 75% - 80% of the exterior brick of this church building. We celebrate with you how well the Sunday School is going, and the youth you are able to support and encourage. We celebrate your good relationship to your minister David Sutherland and his being here over ten years now. These are just a very few examples of many that could be cited to celebrate. This doesn't mean you

don't have any more growing or learning to. We all do. And when the exterior brick is finished in the next year or so, there still will be many challenges. But what a great accomplishment to celebrate that will be. We need to celebrate people and accomplishments long before they pass away into history. Have you noticed that we often wait to say positive things publicly about people until after they have died?

So where do we go when we want to celebrate? We go often to the same persons we would go to if we have pain or suffering. We go to those closest to us. We go to our loved ones, to those who know us, who listen to us, who care. I hope that your church family has some in it to whom you can go. This is in part a big part of what it means to be family, to be friends. Now I know we don't talk about the deepest parts of ourselves, our pain, our joys, with just anyone. But we do need to talk. I urge you to identify and/or seek out such ones without whom you would have no one to talk deeply. I urge you to wisely enlarge this circle with safe people who will hear you and care about what you are saying. And seeking professional help is always a sign of maturity, and knowing that we need a little more perspective than we currently have.

I also hope you that you would consider this table, the table of the Lord, as a place to take your pain. Many of us have deep wounds, from a number of difficult relationships, from parts of our childhood and later in life that we cannot and could not change. I hope you will be able to bring your suffering, the deepest part of yourself to Dr. Jesus, the Great Physician. He invites us to his table to remember and to be refreshed. He wants to hear from us what's going on, and he wants to affirm us, challenge us, and love us.

The work that we have before us at the table is simply that of honesty and vulnerability. May God grant us courage to admit our need, personally, as a community, and as a province and nation. We need God, we need each other. Our future together as we help each other is brighter although I would not suggest it is either pain-free or free of challenges and issues. But as we help each other, depend on newly found resources, go to conferences together, work out planning and financing and creatively develop a new sense of why we are here, maybe even plant another congregation where we have lost so many, God will cause us to dream again and make those dreams a reality. As it says in Genesis 11, just before God mixed up all the languages, the Lord says, "If as one people speaking the same language they

have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”

I believe this means that if we plan well together and agree together, there is almost nothing we cannot do. The finances fall into place, the people come together, the community is transformed, reformed and refreshed.

All of this comes from a place of honesty and integrity, admitting our weaknesses and strengths, that we need help and that we have lots of resources and gifted yet broken, like me, people around us. We have so much. We have been given a great legacy here. Now we come to the Table to remember who we are.

Let us pray.