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Suffering, Double Negatives, and the Friday We Call "Good"

Abstract

"The story of Jesus' suffering is powerful, and the theological wonder of it is infinitely profound."

Posting about Christ's humanity on the cross from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/suffering-double-negatives-and-the-friday-we-call-good/>

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Howard Schaap

March 30, 2018



I can't say that I've had much suffering in my life.

There was the time when I got my first migraine at seven years old. I suffered it out in our basement, wondering why half my body was numb and half my head ringing with pain. That day, I bargained with God for my life, promising him I'd do anything for him if he'd just let me live. (He did, but I don't remember what I promised.)

I also watched my wife suffer through a brain tumor. She survived, too, after an 11-hour surgery that left pressure wounds on her body. I watched her wake up on a ventilator. Later, I watched them screw a halo to her skull as part of a "gamma knife" procedure. I remember her shaking with nausea.

But, these stories pale in comparison to most stories of suffering, and both of them together make not even a blip on the map of human suffering through the ages. On this Good Friday, I do not mean to get into some kind of Olympics of suffering. After all, Good Friday is the day that we're supposed to think on Christ's suffering, a suffering infinitely worse than our own.

Or are we? Certainly, thinking on Christ's suffering is important. Even as a kid, I clearly remember being moved in Good Friday services when the pastor read from the gospel accounts of the crucifixion as the wine and the bread were passed. The story of Jesus' suffering is powerful, and the theological wonder of it is infinitely profound. But maybe of all days, Good Friday *is* the day to reconsider just what suffering is and to think on our own suffering.

Suffering means "to be subjected to something bad or unpleasant." Any kind of meditation on suffering must necessarily consider where these "bad or unpleasant" somethings come from. However, we must always consider suffering through concrete examples—or so it seems to me—in order to keep this from being a merely academic exercise.

When I think of suffering and its origins, I think of my aunt Marie, who as a young woman was “subjected to” polio. Recently, I saw pictures of Marie in her youth, when she was a thin young girl dating my uncle Bert, and then after—or rather, during—the polio, as an impossibly, frighteningly thin young bride. My aunt lived out her life as a wife and mother with limited mobility, and then later, with limited respiration. She *suffered* from polio.

Let Aunt Marie’s polio stand for the human condition of frailty and weakness, something we all suffer from to varying degrees. In one sense, to be human is to suffer like my aunt did, to be subjected to forces greater than ourselves that will necessarily cause suffering.

Of course, as Christians we often talk about how God can use suffering like my aunt’s. Romans 5:3 tells us that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Leave it to Paul to see the glass as half-full.

Certainly, suffering *can* change us, can actually make us more human and force us to open our eyes to each other.

Certainly, suffering can change us, can actually make us more human and force us to open our eyes to each other. At his funeral recently, we celebrated the life of Uncle Bert, who dated Marie before she had polio and married her after it had wracked her body. As Uncle Bert’s grandchildren shared how he had touched their lives, we shared the experience and the story of how the seed of their grandparents’ love produced tremendous fruit: from suffering to perseverance to character to hope. It does happen.

I would like *not* to pretend, however—and here comes the first of this article’s double negatives—that my aunt’s polio is *not* part of the condition of things that Jesus wept over at Lazarus’ tomb. That is, these things, things like polio, *should not be*. The kind of games that consider what God’s larger purpose is with mangled bodies are a way to take our eyes off human suffering and thereby to take our eyes off *Jesus’* suffering.

Jesus’ suffering, the Apostles’ Creed reminds us, happened “under Pontius Pilate.” This is another *kind* of suffering, another category of “things bad or unpleasant” that humans are “subjected to”: that which happens at the hands of other humans. Here again, from the war in Syria to the anguish of Parkland students to the stories of #metoo, it’s an Olympics of suffering down here on Planet Earth.

That the Apostles’ Creed mentions Pilate emphasizes that Jesus’ suffering was historical—it happened in time and place, it was *real*—and it happened at the hands of a political authority. Pilate himself did very little in the way of the actual torture of Jesus, even trying to symbolically wash his hands of the situation, and yet he’s responsible. The world over, authorities subject human beings to things bad and unpleasant, as people *suffer* at the hands of false lords and bad judgments; Jesus knows that kind of suffering. His suffering is another important reason for us to stop and consider human rights abuses in North Korea, the bombing of civilians in Syria, the horrors of Abu Ghraib, and a US prison system out of proportion to the population.

But for me, one of the most important pictures of Christ's suffering happens in the dark of night in Gethsemane, when all of the twelve have fallen away and Jesus is left in prayer and anguish, sweating blood.

Sleepless nights run in my family, so the image of Jesus sweating blood—the mental and spiritual suffering manifesting itself in the physical—is very compelling to me, to us. *I've* spent sleepless nights, though none as bad as that. Still, the fact that *he* did is extremely comforting on sleepless nights for anyone—nights after diagnoses, nights before surgeries, nights where one considers mortality and doubt and failure.

The fact that our Lord suffered—in body, in mind, in spirit—makes all the difference, so much so that the writer of Hebrews stumbles all over himself describing the condition of our Lord in Hebrews 4:15. The second part of the verse emphasizes Christ's humanness before sin, that he was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” But, it's the first part that is eye-catching for its double backflips: “For we do *not* have a high priest who is *unable* to empathize with our weaknesses,” the writer begins the verse—using that grammatical no-no, the double negative. The emphasis is unmistakable—we do have a high priest who did in fact suffer the human condition. He *is able* to empathize with our weakness.

On Good Friday, from early morning anguish to torture and death under Pontius Pilate, Jesus' suffering at the hands of the forces that seek to destroy humanity is on full display.

Along with many others, I find it curious that we've named this day “good.” The story is that “good” used to mean “holy” or “pious,” but I'll take our contemporary usage of the word “good” to simply mean “something of quality.” Our human pronouncement that this Friday of history is “good” has an interesting bookending effect for the story of Scripture. At creation, before the marring of the world and the mangling of human bodies began, God looked at his world and declared it good. Now, after we humans have been subjected to suffering for so long, after the Word himself took on flesh and was subjected in full to its badness and unpleasantness as well as its joys, we humans declare this, the incarnation of our God into all things human, “good.”

Bless the Lord, oh my soul.

On this Friday, think on human suffering, on your own suffering and that of others, and think on our high priest who knows us in our humanity—knows us to the full, even and especially in our suffering.

And lo, pronounce it very good.