

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Third Sunday of Lent
March 8, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Romans 5:1-11

Theme: Bless the Lives We Actually Have: Blessed Are Those Who Suffer

[prayer]

In her 2001 novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, author Sue Monk Kidd tells the story of Lily Owens, a young white girl living in 1964 South Carolina. Lily escapes her abusive father and finds refuge with three Black sisters: August, May, and June. May is a deeply empathic soul, easily brought to tears over the suffering of others. She often visits a low stone wall she has built on the property where she stuffs little pieces of paper into the cracks with her prayers. May's wall is meant to be like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, a remnant of the Second Temple's western retaining wall, where Jews go to pray and visitors often leave notes in the crevices.

I also have my own version of a "wailing wall." It's a roughhewn wooden bowl where I put little slips of paper with my prayers. I often turn to this practice when the weight of my own suffering or the suffering of others feels like it is crushing me. I felt that way this week as I processed the devastation of the expanding war with Iran plus a collection of injustices, diagnoses, grief and heartbreak much closer to home. When it all feels like too much to carry, I turn to my "wailing bowl." It is a small act of release, but it helps.

Do you have something that helps you process all the hurt in your life and the world? When it becomes too much to carry, what do you do?

We have been blessing the lives we actually have this Lent, and today we are blessing those who suffer, which is to say, all of us. I am not going to attempt to explain why we suffer or why God allows us to suffer. Theologians call that the question of theodicy, and while I could give you my best theologian's argument for why suffering exists, trust me – it won't be satisfactory. Trying to explain the *why*

of suffering doesn't change the fact that suffering *is*. It exists and, despite our best attempts to fend it off, no one escapes it.

I try to take my cues from Jesus who, in his Sermon on the Mount, does not explain away the suffering of the people in front of him – people who were living in abject poverty, people who were worn down with grief, people who were just trying to survive while their leaders kept placing heavy burdens on their backs. Jesus acknowledges their suffering, but he does not give them a *why*. Instead, he gives them a *how*. How do we bear our suffering? How do we bear the suffering of others?

Both Jesus and Paul tell us that we are blessed when we suffer. That can be hard to believe when you are in the thick of pain. Paul goes a step further and tells us we can be *proud* when we suffer (v. 3), which sounds kind of scandalous when Christians are supposed to swear off pride. But Paul is proud of his suffering because it is an opportunity to share the suffering of Jesus – the God who put on human flesh and, therefore, human suffering. For followers of Jesus, suffering is an opportunity to reaffirm the miracle of the Incarnation, to reaffirm our belief that God does not leave us to suffer alone. Loneliness is perhaps the worst part of suffering – the feeling that no one else in the world understands our pain. But God invited Himself into our suffering. There is nothing you feel that God has not felt, too.

That is the assurance I am seeking when I drop my prayer scraps into my wailing bowl. I want God to answer my prayers, to solve my problems, to fix the world. But underneath those desires is the very human need to be seen and known and loved. I need to be assured that God has also felt the smothering isolation of pain...and then overcame it.

A better word for “boast” or “pride” is “confidence.” Paul is telling us we can be confident when we suffer. We can be confident because, for Christians, suffering leads to hope. “Affliction produces endurance [patience], and [patience] produces [a tried and tested] character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame [does not disappoint us], because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (vv. 3-5 NRSVUE). I preached last week that the new birth is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the

assurance of God's love for us, our great Comforter and Advocate who intercedes for us with groans too deep for words (Rom 8:26).

Those inarticulate groans are the sound of a God who held in His body all the pain of the world on the cross. The sound of a Father who endured unthinkable suffering as He watched His son die. The adversary tempts us to believe that God does not love us because He does not immediately deliver us from our suffering. But the cross teaches us that suffering is not a sign of God's abandonment. On the contrary! God does not shirk from human suffering. God is with us in our suffering in the closest way God can possibly be: By embracing our suffering and taking it into His own body.

And through that act of divine solidarity, God was able to overcome pain and suffering on our behalf so that when we suffer, we do not suffer without hope. Instead, we suffer with the assurance that our suffering is not the end of our stories. Our suffering does not lead to oblivion. Instead, we will one day attain the same glory that Jesus has attained. We will overcome. We will share the same resurrection, the same freedom from pain and grief...all because God chose to suffer with us. Paul tells us that we can be confident in this promise because God does not leave anything unfinished. The God who died to justify sinners will also raise us from the dead and glorify us. The hope God offers us will not let us down. As Paul says, "If God is for us, who [or what] can be against us?" (8:31).

I do not claim, and neither does Paul, that this promise makes suffering *easy*. Hope does not make life easier. But it does transform the way we approach our lives because it gives us *meaning* and *purpose*. When we are assured that God has already loved us to the point of death and back, we are transformed. We can face suffering and death with courage. We can stay present to our suffering and the suffering of others. We can offer one another the same love and presence that we have received from God. And we can, by allowing suffering to develop a patient witness in us, model for a hopeless world what hope looks like.

In Chapel Prayer last week we read this quote by twentieth-century nun and philosopher Edith Stein: "Do you want to be totally united to the Crucified? If you are serious about this, you will be present, by the power of His Cross, at every front, at every place of sorrow, bringing to those who suffer, healing and

salvation.”¹ During Lent the whole Church walks with Jesus through the valley of death toward the cross. This season calls us to look at the world as it is, with clear eyes and open hearts, and reckon with our suffering and the suffering of others. This is some of the hardest and holiest work we can do. Sometimes I want God to give me something else to do. And then I remember what a privilege it is to be part of the body of Christ in the world.

One of my favorite writers is Christian author Jen Hatmaker. Jen has a gift for words and for honesty. She wrote this the day after the war with Iran began and I would like to close with it because what she wrote gave me some hope: *“I wish...I was coming to you with clear, thoughtful "leadership" tonight. Someone who had processed the last few days of new hard things: little Iranian girls bombed in their classrooms, another mass shooting in downtown Austin, the atrocities that don't seem to end. My favorite person starts radiation this week for the second cancer in his 40's. My dad has shingles. My kids are managing young adult growing pains and losses and fears, because despite all my efforts to inoculate them from struggle, they have to live a real life like the rest of us did. I invited my brother and his young circus over for dinner, which always seems to help. I told my SIL: "I'm feeling blue lately and I can't exactly source it and don't know what to do." So we ChatGPT'd pics of my backyard for what it might look like without weeds. My nephews went home with no less than 50 rocks they hunted in my flower beds that were, in fact, "crystals, diamonds, and fossils." They each got their own bag to tote their treasures. [My grandson] is six months old today; joy of joys. [My boyfriend] sent a beautiful framed pic today of a perfect recent memory to remind me we are living a long story together...that we do indeed laugh more than anything else. And will again. I don't know. This is the best we can do, beloveds. I guess we make dinner for our families and let our nephews mine for rock treasures in our yards and tell someone who loves us we are feeling sad and maybe scared, and we light candles and pray if we believe in that, and we wear soft clothes as a form of self care. We force ourselves to believe in love and goodness, and if we are honest, plenty of evidence exists to support the theory if we are looking.”*²

The Gospel does not inoculate us against suffering. But it does inoculate us against despair...primarily by reminding us that we belong to God...and to each other.

¹ From *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro. Copyright 2010 The Simple Way and School of Conversion. Page 169.

² <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Cv1eREnhr/>

Blessed are those who suffer...because they do not suffer alone.

Amen.