

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Phillip A. Jackson Sermon Transcript**

Transformation through Suffering

Long blurb: Why is Jesus so testy in today's Gospel? Because he knows suffering is on its way. "Suffering is a great mystery...but sometimes there are unexpected benefits." In today's sermon, Father Phil shares how his experience with cancer gave him a new perspective on life, a richer understanding of death, and "turned my priestly pastoral care to others from a head concept to a heart concept." Will we allow our suffering to break us down or to break us open into something bigger? The readings are Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16; Psalm 22; Romans 4:13–25; and Mark 8:31–38.

Short blurb: God knows exactly what our suffering is, because he's gone through it himself. He says to us, 'If you want to save your life, lose your life! And I'm going to show you the way.'

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated, everyone.

Welcome on this second Sunday of Lent. Good to have you with us, good to have all of you who are watching us online as well. Let's begin with a quote from James Baldwin, who said, "I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering, enough is certainly as good as a feast, but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are." We are in Chapter 8 of Mark's gospel, in many ways, Chapter 8 is the linchpin upon which the entire gospel rests. Jesus' mood to say the least, I've been trying to think of a better word, but the word that I keep coming back to Jesus in Chapter 8 is testy. He is testy, he is agitated from the very beginning. It begins with him feeding the 4,000. He feeds this multitude of people, and in it there's a certain sharpness when you read the Gospel of his response to the unbelief of the disciples. They've seen him feed 5,000 before, and all of a sudden they've forgotten that and can't understand what he's going to do to feed this multitude. Well, he does the same thing. After that, Pharisees come and ask him to produce a sign from heaven, and he is sharp with them. He abrades them and sends them away. Next, he abrades the disciples for not understanding the feeding miracles. He says, "Don't you understand what I did before and why I would do that again?" He's testy.

He then takes two tries to cure a blind man. Remember that one? He lays his hands on him, and he says, "Can you see?" The blind man says, "There's people, but they look like trees." Jesus has to do it a second time before he can liberate him and set his sight free. Then comes this great, powerful moment when he turns and you can feel the testiness in him, the agitation. He turns to the disciples and he says, "Who do people say that I am?" They say, "Well, some say Elijah, some say the prophet, some say this, some say that." What does Jesus say to them next? "Who do you say that I am?" In that crux chapter, Peter says the right thing, "You're the Messiah." Jesus says, "Don't tell anybody. You're right, but don't tell anybody." Why is he agitated? Why is he testy? It's simple, because they're on their way to Jerusalem, and he knows what that's going to mean. That picks up today's gospel in 8:31, when Jesus for the first

of three times he will make this prediction. He says to them that the Son of Man, meaning him, that's a title that he has given himself and uses for himself. He says, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and then be killed. Then after three days rise again." I love this line that Mark includes, it says, "He said all this quite openly, he said it publicly, that the Son of Man would suffer, be betrayed, be killed, and rise again." Which was not exactly a message of success, was it? Not exactly a positive message.

In fact, it's one of those times in history, I am glad I should say, that the idiocy of the Facebook metric did not exist, because that would have gotten dislikes, because Jesus would have had all of these thumbs down, and so recognizing that that's a thumbs down message, Peter then takes Jesus aside and says, "Master, that's a big thing, that's not a success measure, that's not a success story. Take it easy on that." Instead, what does Jesus do? He turns back on Peter, he says, "Get behind me, Satan." Calls him Satan, because who else would stand in the way of God and what Jesus had to undergo? He says, "Get behind me, Satan." Here's the part I love, he says, "Because you have your mind not on divine things, not on the things of God, but on the metrics of men. You're measuring things by how men see things, not how God sees things, and only Satan would tempt you with that. So get behind me with that." I want to offer just some thoughts on suffering. Because a very real part of what Jesus taught that he must undergo, and that he in fact did undergo, was great suffering. I would submit to you one of the reasons why he was testy in today's chapter, is because he knew suffering was coming his way. Suffering is a great mystery. What can we say about suffering? Except that sometimes there're unexpected benefits of suffering. Let me tell you about eight years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer and went through a pretty awful experience, but I'm fine. But I'll tell you, I was suffering, it was a suffering time in my life. I felt great suffering.

It took about three years afterwards for me to recognize that in fact, there came some things out of that, that changed me forever. But they were actually not bad, and maybe even not bad but were profound. I learned what it meant to be a patient. Anybody ever been a patient or have a patient? It's not the most fun thing. You feel vulnerable. You feel weak, you feel at others' mercy and others are doing things to you, you feel kind of helpless. I'd never been a patient before like that. I'll tell you—mother Kristin will Amen me on this— it turned my priestly pastoral care to others, it turned it from a head concept to a heart concept. I know what it means to be in hospital now, I know what that means. When I go and visit people in the hospital, I have an entirely different view of that. Experience also brought me a richer understanding of the nearness of death. It's like right there! It can happen anytime. You don't know. As a friend of mine said who had also gone through a cancer experience, She said, "it feels like one day you're walking along and then all of a sudden the abyss opens up." Which I said, "That's pretty accurate." When you get that call that confirms the diagnosis, it's like the abyss that just suddenly opened up in the middle of the day and there you are staring down into it. I came to understand and appreciate the nearness of death.

Therefore, number 3, I came to have an almost touchingly, comical, or at least charming view of what really matters. Most of the stuff we care about from the vantage point of death or serious illness, most of the stuff we care about, you're not going to care about, you know that, right? Sometimes I catch myself, that's why I say it's almost comical. Sometimes I catch myself being in a lather about something. I can't believe or all indignant about something. Then I'm reminded that that doesn't really matter. Because I can get fussy. Which then I'm brought back by that experience that taught me that there were larger fields to play in. Let me ask you all this: have you ever had an experience of suffering? Anybody? Experience of suffering, you watching us? Is anyone had an experience of suffering? Now, if you had

said to me before my experience, Phil, listen, if God had said listen, "If you go through this experience, which is going to be awful, but on the other side, you're going to be a deeper guy. Phil, would you do it?" You know what I would say? "No, thanks, appreciate the offer. Pass. I'll stay with this. We're good. I don't need it. I wish I could say no. Call me." Have you ever gone through an experience of suffering? If beforehand, someone had said to you, "If you go through this, you're going to be a different person on the other side," and that other person, let's not call her better or worse, or are you going to be different? If you allow it, it can change you in some way that you never anticipated and that you wouldn't give away. Because no matter what I went through, I can tell you that on the other side, I wouldn't give any of that away. I wouldn't give an ounce of it away. Would I have wanted to go through it? No, if I could have read about it in a book, that would have been great. But there are some things in this life, I dare say the things that really matter, the things that really teach us something, you don't learn in a book. You got to learn from life. You got to walk through them.

Those are the things you don't forget. There is great mystery in this and great ambiguity and great beauty. Through it all, there's one thing that I want you to remember, God is always right alongside of us in our suffering. That's why Jesus goes through suffering. God knows exactly what suffering is like because He's gone through it Himself, and so therefore he walks beside us. He says to the people, "If you want life, pick up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, lose your life and I'm going to show you the way." That on the other side of suffering, God is with you and always will be with you. Jesus challenges us to think like God does and not like we do. Because what do we think about suffering? We don't like it. Right now, we think wearing a mask to protect ourselves and others is great suffering, don't we? Going through all this problem in our country. 'I can't wear mask, I don't want to, infringement, freedom, etc.' is not suffering. I help others, it might get us through to the other side. Here's my fear or here's my concern, I should say. See, we're going through this pandemic coming up on a year. As a people in our land, will we allow this thing to break us or to break us open? Which will we choose? Will we choose to save our lives, to do our thing, to let it break us? Or will we allow the suffering to break us open into something bigger, into something different, into something we would never wish to give away?

Amen.