

Adversity and Maturity

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[0 : 0 0] So, good morning to you. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here. Normally at Advent, we follow the lectionary, but we are taking a few weeks this fall to focus on these passages, some of which you heard read this morning, that help us, help define our vision for the kind of community we want to have in our church, and more specifically, what care looks like in our church.

So, we're laying out our vision for congregational care at Church of the Advent. And so, we're asking this question of how can we ensure that every member and regular attender in our community is known, is loved, and can get the care and support they need when they need it.

So, there's a very practical side to this. We've developed a care plan that we're going to be rolling out in the next couple of weeks. But along with that, we thought it would be valuable just to reflect on Scripture together, to remember that this isn't just a strategy that we have in our church.

It's actually God's vision for how His church should function. And so, we're wanting to reflect on what that vision is. And we began last week with the fact that the church is a spiritual family.

If we want everyone to be cared for well, if we want the kind of community where everyone is known, loved, and cared for well, then what that means is that we have to operate like a spiritual family.

[1 : 3 4] So, we can't just outsource care to a few trained professionals, although they have a role to play in this. Care has to be the work of the whole church. So, that's what we talked about last week.

This week, we're going to look at the next piece of this, which is, how do we think about care as it relates to suffering and adversity in the church?

Some people, I think probably a lot of us might assume, that if you are in a truly caring community, that means you're going to be in a community where there's no pain or suffering. Because all the needs get met, all the issues get worked out.

But as we're going to see this morning, a good care plan, and I think a biblical care plan, recognizes that some forms of adversity are not only unavoidable, but they're actually necessary.

They're actually necessary in order for us to flourish. So, that may be an odd thing to talk about when we talk about care, but it's a very important thing for us to recognize. So, we're going to look at our text this morning, and we're going to ask two questions.

[2 : 4 1] Why is adversity necessary? And then, how does that shape the way we care for one another? So, let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we come to you this morning asking that you would be true to your promise to be with us, that you would speak through your written word to us, that by your grace, you would give us the ability to sit under your word and to receive what you have for us, that you would open our hearts, that if there are those here who have become too complacent, that we would be stirred up, that we would be challenged, Lord, through your word.

If there are those here who are facing great adversity, who are suffering, that you would comfort us, Lord, that you would do your work in us through your word for your glory.

In Jesus' name, amen. So, our primary passage that we're looking at in terms of our care plan is this passage in Galatians chapters 5 and 6.

Paul's describing what a spirit-filled church community looks like, and the main theme of this passage is in chapter 6, verse 2. The main idea that Paul's working out here is this, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

That's the main idea. A caring community is one, a spirit-filled community is one, where people are regularly bearing one another's burdens. And the word burden means something that's too heavy for a person to carry alone.

[4 : 19] In other words, these are trials and hardships that we can't face alone. The kinds of situations that require you, that demand that you reach out for help.

Now, I want you to notice this morning, we're going to talk more about burdens in the coming weeks, but I want you to notice that the command that Paul gives is not to eradicate burdens altogether. I mean, that would be a very practical and very effective care plan.

Eradicate all burdens. But that's not what he says. The command is that we bear our burdens together. The assumption being, burdens will always be there. They are an unavoidable part of life.

Now, you know, suffering wasn't originally part of God's created world. But after human beings rebelled against God, suffering became an inevitable part of life.

It's part of what it means to live in a fallen world. Some forms of suffering are the result of the natural world not functioning as it should. Natural disasters, disease. Some suffering is the result of human evil and injustice that we commit against one another.

[5 : 28] Some suffering is suffering that we bring on ourselves as a result of our own inward brokenness. But suffering is inevitable in all of its forms.

And so if you look at the New Testament writers, they all assume that suffering is going to be a part of life. And they write about it pretty extensively. But what's amazing is to see not just the fact that they talk about suffering, but the way they talk about suffering.

That's the thing that really begins to stand out as unique in the Christian community. The Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 5, we rejoice in our sufferings.

Now, what kind of crazy fool would say that? Well, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

Knowing that, I rejoice when I suffer. The Apostle James writes, the very opening of his letter, count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

[6 : 31] Why? Well, you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Both of these apostles are talking about suffering as a source of great joy. And we say, why? Is this masochism? No, it's because they understand this crucial truth.

That the road to maturity passes through adversity. The road to maturity passes through adversity.

They don't rejoice in the adversity itself. That's masochism or sadism. They're looking down the road. They're looking down the road. And they're rejoicing in the long-term impact of adversity on their character.

They understand that through this adversity, they are becoming something. So qualities like endurance, resilience, steadfastness can only be found on the far side of suffering.

[7 : 43] Some of those virtues that we might desire for ourselves can only be found on the far side of suffering. So Paul and James are rejoicing because they realize, I'm on the right path.

I'm on the right path. Now, to some degree, this is common sense, I think. Anything in your life that you want to improve probably means you're going to have to go through some short-term discomfort in order to get there.

If you want to get fit, you have to exercise. If you want to get good grades, you have to put in the work and study hard. If you want to lose weight, you're probably going to have to deal with your cravings as you shift your diet.

The same is true spiritually. But for some reason, I think that we can tend to forget that. You know, when John Quincy Adams, you may have heard this story.

When John Quincy Adams was 12 years old, his father wanted to take him on a diplomatic trip to France. And that's going to involve at least a month sailing across the Atlantic Ocean in a leaky boat.

[8 : 46] And then two more months traveling by mule across Spain and over the Pyrenees Mountains to finally get to France. There was a lot of risk involved.

The possibility that they would not survive the trip was very real. And John did not want to go. So, his mother Abigail writes him a letter.

And here's what she says in the letter. It is not in the still calm of life or the repose of a Pacific station that great characters are formed.

The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues. When a mind is raised and animated by scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant, wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman.

She knew the risks. She loved her son dearly. She knew that if he went, there was the risk of harm. She knew that if he went, there was the risk of death.

[9 : 59] But she knew that if he stayed behind, there was also a risk. The risk that the great virtues in him might never be called forth.

The risk that those virtues, those qualities that would emerge in him and transform him into the man that he had been created to be, that those qualities might remain dormant, that his character might remain half-formed.

And in her mind, that was the greater risk. How many parents do you know today who would think like this about their children?

We're like, oh, don't get too close to the water. You know, put on a hat when you go outside because you're going to catch cold. And she's like, you might die. You might suffer terribly.

I might never see you again. But this is a shot for you to become the man that you were born to be. It's a completely different perspective. This whole approach to adversity, I think, sounds crazy to many modern Western ears.

[11 : 07] And that's because these days we tend to assume that the best life or the most joyful, happiest life is a life that is totally safe. That by definition, a happy life is a comfortable life.

It's a life that is free from all forms of adversity. But we need to ask, is that actually true? Is that based on an accurate understanding of human nature? You know, there's a book that came out recently, and a little nod to Deborah who told me about this book.

It's called The Comfort Crisis by Michael Easter. And he basically says that in the West that we tend to assume that comfort equals happiness. So we've worked very hard to remove as many discomforts and inconveniences as we possibly can from our daily lives so that we can be happier.

So the question we need to ask is, 2023, are we any happier? According to the research, even though our lives are a lot more comfortable, even though we have conveniences that people 100 years ago could never even imagine existing, turns out we're not any happier.

In fact, the book would argue we are worse off. As he puts it, our sheltered, this is a quote from him, our sheltered, temperature-controlled, overfed, under-challenged lives are actually a leading cause behind many of our most urgent physical and mental health issues.

[12 : 41] So let's just give one example of this. Let's consider one of the mildest forms of adversity we might face. Boredom. Some of us hate, as a kid growing up with ADHD, you know, in the 80s and 90s, I hated to be bored.

Boredom is a form of adversity. For all of human history, we have been forced to contend with boredom. Our brains had to fill in gaps of time when we weren't being actively engaged or stimulated.

You're waiting in the bushes for the animal that you've been stalking all day to come by, and you just have to wait. Right? You're waiting for the dough to rise and proof.

You're waiting for the fire to be hot enough to cook on. And you have to wait. And your mind has to fill in that time. And boredom was a good thing because it's an urge that says you need to go do something productive.

But in 2007, the first iPhone came out. I'll never forget. It came out, I think, in June.

[13 : 55] Laura and I got married in July of that same year. And I remember she had a Blackberry. We used to call them Crackberries. And I had, and I needed a new phone. And so I went out and bought the first iPhone.

And I remember sitting at home that night, and we're both looking at our devices. And she had had to replace her Blackberry, and I got an iPhone. And she kind of laughed and said, oh, what is that toy that you got? And I said, well, I think it's actually pretty cool.

And then we started looking at it and comparing. And the next day, she went out and returned her Blackberry and got an iPhone. Why? Because I remember it was like something magical.

It's like we had never had anything like that. It was entirely new. And we had no idea the impact that that was going to have on our world. But with the birth of the iPhone, boredom became a thing of the past.

No more boredom. Now we never have to face a single moment without stimulation. So when we're sitting in a stoplight, we can send out texts. When we're standing in line at the grocery store, we can knock out some email.

[14 : 58] When we're walking to the metro, we can listen to a podcast. When we're going for a run, we can listen to music. When we're driving somewhere, we can make phone calls or listen to an audio book. When we're sitting on the toilet, we can scroll through Twitter.

You know you do it. Remember when Elon Musk admitted that he posts at least 50% of his tweets from the toilet? He admitted that like a year or two ago.

That's basically what Twitter is. Next time you get angry at a tweet, just think, that probably came from the toilet. People all around the world tweeting at one another from their toilets.

That's Twitter. But we have eliminated boredom. And the question is, are we any happier now that no one has to be bored ever? And obviously, it hasn't made us happier.

If you want to know why you constantly feel exhausted, depressed, anxious, overwhelmed, it's probably at least in part because we are never bored. It turns out we need a certain amount of boredom.

[16 : 03] That our brains need a certain amount of unstimulated downtime to process and to reset. Research study after research study into creativity, they'll take two groups of people.

One group spend an hour scrolling the news. The other group, they just have to sit in a room and do nothing. And then after that hour, they give them a creativity test. Again and again and again and again, that group that sat with nothing to do, far more creative.

There's something about the brain having times to lay fallow that is incredibly generative when it comes to creativity. Now, this is an example of a very minor and almost humorous form of adversity.

But it's something to reflect on. How often do you have times where you are bored? The next time you go for a walk or a run, I would suggest don't listen to anything. Just be alone with your thoughts and with the Lord.

Now, let's go to the other end of the spectrum in terms of suffering and adversity. Joni Eareckson Tada. Smart, athletic, 17-year-old girl getting ready to start college.

[17 : 11] Her whole life laid out before her, all the potential in the world. One day, she's swimming in the Chesapeake Bay. She dives in, not knowing how shallow the water is. She breaks her neck.

Ever since that day, she's been paralyzed from the shoulders down. For a long time after, she struggled with despair and depression and hopelessness like any of us in this room would.

She really struggled to understand how she could believe in a God who would let something like that happen. But then she began to dig deeper and deeper into God's word, and her faith began to grow.

And she spent years thinking and praying about evil and suffering. And she began to realize this, as she says, because God reigns over all, nothing happens outside of God's control and plans.

Even if we can't grasp it this side of eternity, our sufferings have a place in God's plans. Which means we don't suffer in vain.

[18 : 15] Even though God created a world without suffering, even though suffering is the result of our rebellion against God, even though it is evil in His sight, God can still use suffering to accomplish His purposes.

Suffering has a place in God's plans. That doesn't mean that God likes suffering. One of my favorite quotes from Joni is she says, Sometimes God allows what He hates to accomplish what He loves.

Sometimes God allows what He hates to accomplish what He loves. So she begins to discover the same truth that we see in Paul and in James, in people like Abigail Adams, that God can use suffering and adversity to grow us into the men and women that He calls us to be.

The road to maturity passes through adversity. And of course, the greatest example and proof of this is the cross. Because through His suffering, Jesus accomplishes our salvation and makes possible the renewal of all things.

And we look at that and we say, If God can do that through the suffering of Jesus, imagine what He can do through the adversity in my life. So we say, Why is suffering necessary?

[19 : 48] Because God uses it to form us into the men and women He created us to be. As Joni Eareckson Tada says, Suffering provides the gym equipment on which my faith can be exercised.

So when you're facing suffering and adversity, you're in a gym. And in many ways, the church is like a gymnasium. We'll talk more about that image in the coming weeks.

But we're all in here facing our various forms of struggle and adversity. But it's like a gymnasium. Where we're helping and supporting and spotting one another. As we confront these burdens, as we hold them and lift them up.

And we are being formed and strengthened as we do this together. So how does this shape the way we care for one another? Our second question this morning.

Does this mean we should just let people suffer? Does this mean that when I see somebody and they're facing hardship in their life, I say, Well, this is good for you.

[20 : 56] No, absolutely not. I mean, all through his earthly ministry, Jesus, who knew this better than us, did whatever he could to alleviate suffering.

He fed people. He healed the sick. He cast out demons. And then he very clearly called his disciples to do the same thing. So we do, whenever possible, we do whatever we can to try to alleviate suffering around us.

But what this does mean is that we recognize that there is a sacred mystery within suffering. There's a sacred mystery within suffering. There's a way in which God is uniquely present, is uniquely active, is working in the hearts of those who face hardship.

In fact, you might think of it in a sacramental way. That God is working spiritual ends through physical means. In our foundations class, just talked about the sacraments this morning in Sunday school.

And there is a sacramental reality to suffering that we often deny or overlook. So what this means is that when we face adversity, even though our first instinct is to try to alleviate it as quickly as possible, is there a person I can talk to or a pill I can take that will make this go away?

[22 : 15] It's very understandable. The Christian response to suffering is not just to try to take it away, but also to ask God what he's doing in it.

What purposes might we find? What work of the Lord is happening in my life as I face this adversity? What's God doing by allowing this to happen in my life?

Remember, in John chapter 9, the disciples see a man born blind, and they assume this is either punishment for his sins or it's punishment for the sins of his parents. And Jesus' answer, remember, he says, this is not punishment for sin.

That's the wrong lens. If God actually punished everyone for sin, no one would be here. If you all got what you deserve, this is not punishment for sins. He says, this happens so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

And there's a sense where we ask, you know, when we face adversity, what works of God might be displayed in me through this experience?

[23 : 18] What idols might God be stripping away? What things that I was relying on more than God to be God? What idols might God be toppling? What virtues might God be calling out in me?

How might my faith or my prayer life be deepened through this experience? What works of God might be displayed? And this particular idea, I think, is helpful.

When there is suffering, we cannot alleviate in the lives of others. And I think that's one of the hardest things in the church. And maybe one of the reasons why we sometimes shy away from getting involved is because you look at a situation and you think, that's overwhelming.

There's nothing, I don't know what I can do to help this person or to help this marriage or to help this situation. I can't do anything here. And so it's easy just to sort of say, you know, I just don't want to even get involved because you feel overwhelmed.

Most of the suffering in this church, you can't alleviate. The real suffering. If we could wave a magic wand or snap our fingers, we would, but we can't. But what we can do, and what Paul calls us to do, is to bear these burdens together.

[24 : 28] You know, pray for and with those who are suffering. That's one of the things that we can always offer as clergy, but it's one of the things that anybody in this room can offer. I don't know how to fix this in your life, but I can pray for you, and I will pray with you if you want to.

We pray in the midst of our suffering together. Be present with people who are suffering. Just be present. You know, I remember one time I was meeting with a guy.

He was going through really hard stuff. This is years ago. They don't go to our church anymore, but I was meeting with him, and he was sharing just kind of all the stuff that's going on in his life, and I had some things that I thought were pretty sort of like helpful ideas to offer him, and I was kind of like, well, you know, actually had something to offer there, you know.

And then at one point, I really didn't know what to say. He kind of shared some stuff that I just thought, and I said, I'm just going to be honest. I don't know what to say in response to that, but if it's helpful, I can just sit here and absorb some of this, just so that you know that you're not alone in it, and I could just be, and we just sat there for a while, and neither one of us said anything.

We just sat there quietly, and then we kind of moved on with the conversation, and about a year or two later, he said, you know, that time that we met was really helpful, and I was expecting that he was going to quote some of the kind of wisdom that I had dropped on him, you know, this thing that you said, and he said, I don't remember anything that you said, but do you remember that time where we just sat together?

[25 : 59] That was the most helpful thing, and I just thought, man, I needed to learn that lesson. Sometimes the best thing that you can offer somebody is just to sit with them. You don't have to say anything.

It's okay. Most of the time, we don't know what to say, and most of the time when we do say stuff, it's probably not the kind of stuff they really want to hear. You know, when we listen with compassion, you know, resist the urge to kind of fill in that space by comparing their experiences to your own.

You know, they share what they're going through, and you say, oh, I know, the same thing happened to me a couple years. No, in general, it's not a good idea. You're just trying to fill in the space because you're nervous. Resist the urge to say, I'm sure everything's going to be okay.

It might not be. You have no idea if it's going to be okay. We all kind of have to learn that lesson the hard way. Chances are when you say that, you're managing your own anxiety rather than attending to what they actually need.

I remember meeting with a woman who had been, experienced a lot of abuse, and I said that. I was very new. It was my first year as a counselor, and she got up out of her chair, and she came right over to me, and she goes, you have no effing idea what's going to happen.

[27 : 10] How dare you say that? It's like lesson learned. That was the wrong thing to say. Be proactive whenever possible. It's a great way to bear burdens.

A lot of times when people are really suffering, well-meaning people will come in. It's like people come into the kitchen on Thanksgiving and say, hey, can I do anything to help? And you're like, get out of the kitchen.

You know what I mean? So people come in, and they say, well, what can I do to help? And it's very well-meaning, and sometimes you have answers, but a lot of times if you're really facing adversity, you're so tired, and you have so much decision fatigue because you're just treading water that you don't have the energy to think of how to answer that question.

And so you're like, I want you to be able to help, but I just don't know what to tell you to do. I just, I don't have the energy or the clarity of thought right now. I'm just trying to survive. And so if you can be proactive, you know, sometimes identify things that would be helpful and do them.

Hey, has anybody set up a care calendar for you yet? I'll bring you something to put in your freezer tomorrow, and then I'll set up a care calendar. Offer to take their kids to the park for a couple of hours.

[28 : 17] Hey, we're going to the park anyway. Can we pick up your kids? We'll have them back by the afternoon. Offer to come help straighten up their house. You know, even if your house isn't dirty, even if you're a clean person, if you're going through a lot of stuff, just having a clean space to be in can be just tremendously, bring your anxiety down.

So sometimes if somebody's saying, hey, can I just come like help clean your kitchen, do all your dishes? I love to do that kind of thing. Some of you love to organize and clean. You get great, you have this kind of Marie Kondo gene in you, and you love that kind of stuff.

And if that's you, and you can offer that to somebody, blessings. I don't know anybody who would turn that down. Well, maybe, but you shouldn't turn it down. Right? Be proactive.

So these are some of the practical ways that you can bear burdens with somebody else who's suffering, and even if you can't fix it, can't alleviate it. You're just there with them in it. And if we take everything that we have said this morning to heart, the vision is that we begin to build a culture here at Church of the Advent where we simply accept that suffering is a normal part of life.

And that's a big deal in the church. We want a culture where we can talk openly about our struggles, talk openly about mental health challenges and issues which often in the church feel like they need to be sequestered off where you just don't bring that to church.

[29 : 41] That's like your private life. We want a culture where we can talk about that stuff openly, where if people are depressed or suicidal or struggling with various issues, they feel like they can talk about that and it's not gonna be, we're not gonna try to pray it out of you that day, although we'll pray for you.

We're not gonna demonize you, pathologize you, judge you, condemn you as having weak faith. We're gonna assume, oh, that's part of what it means to be a Christian in a broken world. We struggle with this stuff. A culture basically where it's okay to not be okay.

That would be the vision that we have. This is a church where it's okay to not be okay. Because a community like that is a living to, a community where everybody looks like they're okay all the time, what's that a testimony to?

That's a testimony to our excellence. But a community where it's okay to not be okay, where we openly talk about and share our struggles with one another and where we bear them together, that's a testimony to God's greatness.

It's a testimony to the truth of the gospel, the truth that we can trust God even in the face of adversity because the cross shows us not only that God was willing to suffer with us and for us, but that one day he will bring an end to all suffering once and for all.

[30 : 52] And so we can talk about it knowing this is life now, but one day every tear will be wiped away and it will not be so. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that of all the gods, all the religions, all of the gods who condemn suffering, you're the only God who suffered.

And so you're a God who can actually offer us comfort. That when you call us to bear one another's burdens, you do it as a God who has borne our burdens. A God who's still in our midst, bears our burdens.

I pray that we would recognize the sacred mystery, the sacramental reality within suffering, and that even as we seek to alleviate it, we would be open to what you might do through it.

That if the road to adversity, to maturity does indeed pass through adversity, that you would be with us in that adversity and that you would produce in us that maturity through which we would more clearly reflect your image.

And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen.