

Sermon: Zero Suffering

Year B, Trinity Sunday

[Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17](#)

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I liked the Children's sermon about the dad paying for the bike, making good on a debt that the kid could never repay. At least it made me think about the debt I owe to God in a way that I hadn't really seen it before.

Because raising kids is expensive. In 2017, Money magazine says that for a middle class family in the US, the Department of Agriculture estimates it will cost \$233,610 to get a kid to age 17.¹ No college. No special medical or educational bills before that. Just food, clothing, shelter, and all the regular necessities like ice cream and movies. And that is likely low.

For kids and parents in healthy relationships, there's no expectation that the kids will pay the parents back. But the debt is there. It's a fact. And that fact is a part of the healthy relationship. The rest of the reading from Romans is trying to acknowledge the fact of the debt, but also describe the healthy relationship with God in a way that's also worth looking at.

Today's reading concludes *we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him* (Romans 8:16-17). We are children of God and joint heirs with Christ if we suffer with Christ. We have an image of the crucifixion as Christ's suffering. And don't get me wrong, it was a horrible and painful way to die. But think of Christ's whole ministry. Wasn't there suffering throughout all his work? He saw a world so far from what God was calling it to be. He saw people so focused on death, so controlled by death, so determined that the only response to death was to cram as much pleasure into this life as possible. And if that pleasure created more suffering for other people and for the rest of God's creation, well, so what? Jesus saw that as pure misunderstanding of God's intention for us. And he preached and taught and healed all over Israel to get out the message that this life is not all that there is. To get out the message that there is a power and a love greater than anything we can experience or imagine in this world. So we can let go of the habits ruled by death and embrace the habits ruled by that love.² And the world absolutely rejected that message, that truth. Rejected it to the point of silencing Jesus on the Cross. If we focus solely on the suffering at the end of Jesus' earthly life, we avoid looking at the suffering he endured long before that.

Jesus called out to us to stop living as if death was the most powerful thing in the world and start living into the truth, that our God is an awesome God who reigns from heaven above with wisdom, power and love, that our God is an awesome God. Jesus invited us into a relationship with God where we call God "Abba" which is translated "Father" but really should be translated "Daddy" or "Poppa". It's that intimate. It's what a little kid calls his dad.

When you begin dating someone, you might mention it to your parents. But the relationship takes on a whole new aspect when you invite the person you love to meet your parents. Even if

¹ Mahita Gajanan, "The Cost of Raising a Kid Jumps to \$233,610" *Money*, January 9, 2017.

<http://time.com/money/4629700/child-raising-cost-department-of-agriculture-report/> (accessed May 15, 2018)

² Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1949), 325.

you have a crazy relationship with your parents, inviting your sweetheart to meet them, so they can see with their own eyes the crazy that is your family of origin, is an intimate invitation.

Jesus is inviting us to live in a healthy, intimate relationship with God.³ Jesus is inviting us to let go of the crazy, unhealthy relationship with have with death, to walk away from all the destructive behaviors that relationship drives us to. Jesus is saying that our lives will move closer to the lives God is offering us if we accept the wisdom, power and love from our divine Daddy, our divine Poppa.

And let's say we do that. Let's say we accept the wisdom, power and love from our divine Dad. And then we go out into the world of a nuclear armed North Korea, of school shootings in Texas and Noblesville, Indiana, and a single truck in Nebraska that was seized with enough illegal fentanyl in it to kill millions of people. There is no way we are going to avoid suffering. Those may not be nails in the hands and feet and a spear in the side, which were awful. But they are a blow to the heart. They are a burden of suffering of we carry, every hour of every day because we have a sense of how it might be, and yet it isn't because too many people around us have chosen to let death rule their lives. We suffer because we are constantly caught in the tension of living in the flesh and yet longing for the Spirit of God.⁴ Fully human and fully divine Jesus of Nazareth was caught in that tension as well. He suffered too. This suffering of his we can share, if we are willing to acknowledge it.

Today's reading from Romans starts out with the stark announcement that we are debtors. It's an image we understand. In our lives we work along and send in monthly payments in special envelopes, trying to get to zero. And if we ever get there, on our car, on our student loans, we put the piece of paper which says "you are officially at zero" in our safety deposit boxes. Because proving we got to zero is vital.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are never going to get to zero with God. Rena is never going to give us a slip to put in our safety deposit boxes that says, "With last week's check, you have paid off your debt to God." She would if she could.

And that reality, that truth, is at the heart of Christian stewardship. We pledge money to the church not to get to zero with God, but to put our money where our mouths are. We pledge money to witness that we have accepted the invitation to a loving, healthy, intimate relationship with God. We pledge money to help lessen the suffering we feel, along with Christ, when the rest of the world remains in an unhealthy relationship with death. We pledge money to support the work that we are doing as a community in that wider world to help bring more people into contact with Christ's message.

The other thing I'd like you to notice about this reading from Romans is the way it describes how we accept and live inside God's invitation. We do it together. All the verbs in this section are

³ Clayton J. Schmit, "Trinity Sunday, Homiletical Perspective, Romans 8:12-17" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 41.

⁴ J. Barney Hawkins IV, "Trinity Sunday, Pastoral Perspective, Romans 8:12-17" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 42.

plural.⁵ We are debtors (Romans 8:12), we live (Romans 8:13), we are led (Romans 8:14), we cry “Abba” or “Daddy” (Romans 8:15), we are children of God (Romans 8:16), we suffer with Jesus and we are glorified with him (Romans 8:17). We do all those things together. The reading is very clear. The Holy Spirit testifies with us (Romans 8:16). We are the fellow-heirs of Christ since we suffer together.⁶ That is the heart of stewardship. We work together, in time, treasure and talent, not to pay off a debt we can never redeem, but because we have accepted the invitation to a loving, healthy, intimate relationship with God. We will suffer with Jesus because the rest of the world has not yet accepted that invitation. We will do all this together, to transform the world and transform ourselves. That’s how we live with the reality of a debt we can never repay. We live together. With Christ. All of us children of God.

⁵ Matthew S. Rindge, “Trinity Sunday, Exegetical Perspective, Romans 8:12-17” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 43.

⁶ Rindge, 43.