

“Return and Give Thanks”

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In my last congregation, when I started there, I met this wonderful woman named Lois. Lois was so special, because she was so in love with her husband Vern. By the time I got there, Vern was in a wheelchair, in a nursing home, with a totally blank, unresponsive expression. Eighteen to twenty four months earlier he was fine. One day he started to slip and stare off into space. Lois said, “You know, Vern, let’s go to the doctor because something just isn’t right,” because Vern had always been sharp as a tack.

That short amount of time later their worlds changed. They had retired not long before that. They had had the world by the tail, and she could have become so bitter, because everything they had planned for their whole lives was gone [snap], that fast. Yet every day she would go and sit next to Vern. She would hold his hand. She would kiss him and talk to him like he was there, like he had always been. I have told this [story] in little snippets before, but I think that is probably the greatest story of romance I have ever been blessed to witness.

When you are young, you think, “Oh, romance. It is all in the gooey, lovey stuff.” But real romance comes when you love someone, when they don’t necessarily or are not able to love you back. Real romance comes when it’s not easy, but it is so ingrained in your very being that your love just flows. Hers always did for him.

When I first met them I thought this is really sweet of her [Lois] to do this - but did she really mean it? The longer you were with her, and with them, the more you knew she meant every word of it. She meant every minute, every touch, because the love in that moment wasn’t just what was happening now that he had Alzheimer’s, but that love was extended from the time they met through the times that they were together. The way they raised their children. The way they embraced their grandchildren. The joys they had shared and the hardships they had gotten through together. All that love and experience was lived out in the way she expressed her love to him, in those moments.

What I realized and why I’m sharing that, in relationship to a story about 10 lepers, is because, just like those lepers, love and suffering go together hand in hand. The lepers suffered immeasurably. They suffered because they were in pain with their limbs. The reason they were not in more pain was their nerve endings had been destroyed. The reason they were in emotional and spiritual pain because they had to be separated from the rest of society. Yet they still trusted and they reached out to God and Jesus Christ. Jesus responded. And sadly, and yet still with hope, one responded back in humility, gratitude and in love. He came back and thanked Jesus for healing him, restoring him. In suffering he realized and learned love in Jesus.

Now I want to talk to you for a few minutes about what it means to struggle with love and suffering as part of the same thing. I found this through a wonderful book called "The Naked Now," written by a Franciscan Priest named Richard Rohr. Father Rohr started writing books about mysticisms and spirituality, and they have taken off. So by the time he had written his most recent book, "The Naked Now," the people who recommend him and write, "read this book," on the back of the cover, are people like Bono. Bono is everywhere. He is from YouTube, by the way, if you have heard of the musical group. And Bono wrote this because he, himself, has been so touched by the mysticisms and the Christian spirituality of Richard Rohr.

He [Rohr] starts talking about the fact that great love and great suffering are what transform our lives and they are not opposites. Often they are found together. And Richard Rohr says only love and suffering are strong enough to break down the ego defensiveness within each one of ourselves, each one of our souls. It crushes that dual thinking of either "everything has to be good" or "everything is horrible." I'm either happy or I'm totally sad. I can only love if everything is right and I can only be fulfilled when I'm without suffering.

Richard Rohr says, "No, that is not the case at all. Love and suffering are part of the same world and the same life, and we have to figure out the mystery of how we live with them both at the same time." Like our dear friend Lois, who learned how to continue loving even while she suffered, missing her Vern so much.

Father Rohr starts out with Scripture and he goes to Acts 17:17-28. He said, "Always remember: for God is not so far from any of us, since it is in God that we live and move and have our being. God is in us, around us, and through us, and God's love, therefore, is in us, around us, and through us. God can care for us and bring us the ability to love even when we do not feel it. God can allow us to express it, even when we are at our darkest, lowest moments. God can pull us up and be there for others.

"You can't do it yourself. You can't suck it up, pull yourself up by your own boot straps and do it. You and I are not capable of doing that. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit can you keep from becoming bitter and isolated in your suffering. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit can you retain the love, because all love comes from that Spirit. God can move you forward, but you have to trust and pray, and allow God to open your heart."

For Father Rohr says that we are simply a conduit of the Holy Spirit. If we are doing our task, that conduit moves through us. We don't love. God loves through us. Even when we are suffering, that doesn't mean that that conduit has to be cut off. It means that the Holy Spirit can continue to thrive and move through us.

We are not put on this world to help ourselves to be happy all of the time and to be free of all struggles. In fact, we are placed here in many ways to struggle. The more faithful you are the more God empowers you and treats you with the blessing of suffering, because less holy people could not endure it. Less faithful people would give up, become bitter, curse God and die, as they talked about in the book of Job. For you who suffer, God knows that your conduit will not break, that the Holy Spirit can move through you and change your lives - not only your lives but everyone around you.

As I said, Lois had children and they learned how to love, not because Lois and Vern were so gushy and lovey when everything was fine; Lois taught her children how to really love in the most painful moments, when dad couldn't love her back - but she kept loving anyway.

I performed the weddings of, I think, all of her grandchildren. Every one of them mentioned Grandma and Grandpa, and they talked about Vern as if he were always just fine, because she loved him as if he were there. They never saw him as anything but whole. That is what love can do when you do not let the bitterness of life break the conduit of your soul and the Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter. Your life doesn't have to be sad, or miserable, or hurtful, just because things stink now and then.

Maybe even the suffering you have had to go through or are going through right now, may be a very large gift from God. Not necessarily to you because, frankly, who wants to go through that suffering? But to those you love, to your children, to your grandchildren, or your great-grandchildren, who are living in a world of immediate gratification - who think love is a constant honeymoon, so you move from one person to another, to another.

I heard Cher - the singer - one time call herself a serial monogamist. I had to ponder that for a few minutes. She talked about it because she is monogamous with whoever she is with at the time. She kind of moves from one to another at a rather rabid rate, because she is always reaching out for the next wonderful perfect honeymoon moment.

But when you get older, you come to realize that love is big enough for as long as you make me happy, make me feel perfect, comfortable, safe, lustful, whatever makes that joyous. But then, by the end of your days, you are still experiencing love that day. But when you endure the suffering, the ups and downs, and ins and outs of a full life with all of its struggles and joys, sorrows and beneficial blessed moments, by the end of your days together, your love is that large.

It may not be that same honeymoon moment. It may be even better and it took the suffering to make it that rich and that whole.

So as Father Rohr says - and I have come to believe: Don't curse the suffering too quickly. Embrace it as you embrace love, because in it you have the opportunity to retain your conduit and give love beyond yourself, so that your children and grandchildren, when their struggles come - and they will - won't just bounce on to the next honeymoon moment, but will experience the richness that only God can provide; and a healing that goes beyond the pain of the moment and heals the soul, and allows love and life to shine. And then no moment is ever that dark, but always that rich and that whole. Trust it. Embrace the suffering. Feel God's love, now and always. Amen.