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Shrove Tuesday brings to mind a number of memories for me. Among them is a cat fight. My cat, Bandit never passed up the opportunity for a really good fight. And on Shrove Tuesday of 2009, Donna and I had just arrived at the Rectory in Bennettsville, following the annual Pancake Supper at St. Paul's. It was around 9:00 PM, long after office hours at the vet. But Donna had noticed earlier in the day that Bandit had some swelling on the right side of his head. That evening, Bandit's head looked something like a lop-sized, furry soft ball.

So, soon after first light on Ash Wednesday morning, Donna put Bandit in his pet carrier and drove him to the Vet's office. The first thing Dr. Eades said upon examining Bandit was, "Ah, so he's one of the courageous ones!" The Vet pointed to a place near Bandit's right eye and told Donna, "You can see the infection point right there, at the corner of the eye where Bandit took a claw strike. Now, most of the time when I see wounds like that on a cat, they're on the animal's haunches or somewhere else on the hind-quarters. Cats will normally get that kind of wound when they're running away from an attacker. But every once in a while; you meet a cat who has a claw strike right there on his face, as he stood his ground to meet his attacker. Every once in a while, you meet a cat who's not afraid of pain."

Boy, there sure is a lot of pain and suffering in today's lessons, isn't there! Genesis Chapter 9 talks about the Great Flood which decimated the earth, a catastrophe that was surely the cause of horrific pain and suffering. The epistle from 1st Peter is all about suffering for the Lord. And in the Gospel lesson from Mark which depicts the baptism of Jesus, just after the voice from heaven announces how God is so well pleased with Christ, the Father sends his only begotten son off into the desert to suffer.

I did a little reading this week about what the Bible says concerning suffering, and it seems that so much of Scripture links pain and suffering to a cause for thanksgiving, celebration, and even rejoicing. Why does the Bible constantly tell us that we should rejoice in suffering? Here's what I found:

(IPet.3:14- *today's epistle*) *"But even if you suffer for what is right, you are blessed."*

(1Pet.2:19) *"For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly."*

(Ja.5:10-11a) *'As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Indeed we call them blessed...'*

(Rom.5:2b-3a) *"...we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also rejoice in our sufferings..."*

(Jn.16:33a) *"I have said [all] this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you face persecution. But cheer up!"*

For goodness sake, why does God's word constantly tell us that we should rejoice in suffering? Is there such a thing as Godly pain?

If you think about the last time you saw numerous members of your extended family and friends, chances are the occasion was either a wedding or a funeral. Those are the two occasions when we are most likely to come together. Now, it's easy to understand why weddings represent such an important time for people to be together. What better chance do we have to share each other's joy than at a celebratory event like a wedding? But it's a little harder to understand why people insist on congregating on the occasion of a funeral. Why is it that funerals are such an important time for people to come together? Not just in the Christian faith, but in countless cultures around the world, funerals are always a critically important time for people to come together and be with each other. So, when we come together to celebrate the dead, could there be something going on that's working in the **lives of the living**? When people share their pain, is that kind of giving and receiving an essential bond in melding us together as a true fellowship? So being together in our suffering, is that an essential step for us so that we may also be truly united in our rejoicing?

The Apostle Paul has the answer here. I imagine that just about everyone in this church has heard at

some-time-or-another, the words from the great "love chapter" in the Bible, 1st Corinthians, Chapter 13. That's the chapter where Paul shows us a more excellent way to live our lives in fellowship to the glory of God. This is the chapter where Paul talks about the three special gifts of the Holy Spirit, those three marvelous types of glue that bind the Corinthians together; faith, hope, and love the greatest of the three being love - that Spirit-filled sentiment which is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful or proud, not rude, nor self-seeking, nor prone to anger nor to vengeance, not delighting in evil but rejoicing in the truth, protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering. (See 1Cor.13:4-7) That's what love is. And this is a wonderful chapter, 1st Corinthians 13 - a chapter of the Bible which describes the type of faith, hope and love as the amazing life that awaits the Corinthians in their fellowship, lived to the glory of God. But you may not have noticed what Paul says just before all of this victorious language. Because in the chapter right beforehand, Paul says this: "*But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it...*" (1Cor.12:24-26a)

For the Apostle Paul, it would seem that before we can experience the life of true Christian fellowship - all of that faith, hope, love, that enormous blessing of all those wonderful gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit, which are the hallmarks of our joyous life in Christian fellowship, before we come to this place of rejoicing we must first meld ourselves together as a truly unified people of God. And that type of spiritual bonding is given to us more than anything else by our ability to shoulder and share each other's pain. So, yes, in suffering there is at the end great rejoicing. In fact, for the fellowship of believers there can be no rejoicing without first learning to suffer, to suffer for and with each other.

Here's one last thought. In addition to binding you and me together in the fellowship of the believers, there's another kind of sharing that suffering can give us. In this wonderful pastoral letter from that fisherman who became a fisher of men, in 1st Peter chapter 4, we read this: "*Beloved, do not be surprised at the painful trial that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings...*" {1Pet. 4:12-13}

For Peter, when we suffer for each other, when we suffer for the righteousness of this world, we are actually participating in the suffering of Christ. And in a mighty and mystical way beyond human comprehension, this kind of sharing of pain binds us together not just to each other, but it binds us together with Jesus himself. To suffer for our faith, to suffer for each other, to suffer for what is right is a cause for great rejoicing more than anything else because it makes us one with the Lord of love himself.

Dear friends, the conscientious, the fair-minded, the humble, the devoted, the true, the Godly of this world are called to suffer for *one* primary reason alone, and that is so God can prove to His children His everlasting faithfulness and *mercy*: God cannot reach down and rescue us, you see, until we find ourselves in dire straits. God cannot save us until we come to the understanding that only He can save us from the truly awful of this life. This morning, the Psalmist says, "*All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies... Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting...*" (Ps.25:9, 5) Only when we are in the furnace of life do we truly understand how the quenching waters of God are the only thing that can revive our souls and bring us to a place of joy.

When you and I were baptized into our faith in Jesus Christ, we were actually raised from the water of our Baptism not only to His glory but also to His suffering. For how else can we be truly united to Christ? How else can we be truly His?

So, in this reflective, quiet season of Lent, let us not turn away from our own suffering nor from the pain of others. Let us be courageous and meet it head on, *even* if that means bearing our faces to the claw marks that this life is so prone to give us. This Lent, let us shoulder the burdens and the pain of others, and let us rejoice and be glad in it. For in so doing we truly become a holy fellowship of God, united to Christ with his burden and in His glory. Blessed Lent.

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