

keep peace by enduring suffering themselves rather than inflict it upon others. They overcome evil with good by living the love that is God in and through their relationships with others. They are truly “partners in Christ’s work of reconciliation”—and so, they are truly blessed.

“Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Bonhoeffer points out that “righteousness” here is not the righteousness, or grace, of God, but instead the righteousness of justice. Those who suffer for righteousness for Christ—those who suffer for doing the right thing—those individuals are blessed by their suffering, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Must be willing to suffer. Not all suffering, of course, is good, because not all suffering is redemptive. But, according to Bonhoeffer, even non-redemptive suffering can become redemptive—if we do it in the name of Christ.

Jesus urges us in the Gospel of Matthew to “take his yoke upon us” (Matthew 11:29), for it’s in his yoke—it’s in our shared suffering with one another—that our burdens become light and our souls find rest. It’s in his yoke, in other words—in this shared suffering—that non-redemptive suffering becomes redemptive, through the love that is Christ. It’s in his yoke that meaningless suffering is given purpose, *through* Christ.

Must be willing to suffer. It doesn’t sound like much of a job description ... and yet, it describes the only job in life that’s worth anything at all—the job of a disciple

A *disciple*. Someone who understands that the suffering that comes with the call to follow Christ—the call to be *obedient* to Christ—truly *is* a blessing, not because suffering in and of itself has any meaning, but because redemptive suffering endured on

behalf of Christ leads to the kingdom of heaven—the ultimate blessing.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

“The messengers of Jesus will be hated to the end of time. They will be blamed for all the divisions which rend cities and homes. Jesus and his disciples will be condemned on all sides for undermining family life, and for leading the nation astray; they will be called crazy fanatics and disturbers of the peace. The disciples will be sorely tempted to desert their Lord.

But the end is also near, and they must hold on and persevere until it comes.”

Blessed be all who accept the job of disciple, and the suffering it entails.

Blessed be those who hold on and who persevere and who suffer—*redemptively*— on behalf of Jesus Christ.

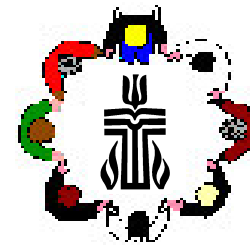
Blessed be this “good” suffering that leads to eternal life.

Amen.

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“Must Be Willing To Suffer”

Sermon by
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Second Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2008



Matthew 5:1-12, 7:21-24

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 5:1-12, 7:21-24

When looking for a new job, one of the first things we want to see with respect to any prospective job is a job description. A job description, as you know, is a list of duties and responsibilities that the job entails, along with the qualifications necessary to do it.

For example: A job description of a lifeguard might include guarding the pool, ensuring the safety of the patrons, keeping the pool and its surrounding area clean, and teaching swimming lessons. The qualifications for being a lifeguard might include certification, a minimum age, and the ability to work a certain number of hours.

Writing a job description for something like a lifeguard is fairly straightforward, because the job is fairly well-defined.

But how do you write a job description for a position that's maybe a little *less* well-defined? A job where the qualifications are a little less straightforward?

A job, for example, like *disciple*?

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer could summarize that job—the job of disciple—in five simple words:

Must be willing to suffer.

It's an odd job description, to say the least ... but that doesn't mean it's not true. Because, according to Bonhoeffer, it *is* true. Because, according to Bonhoeffer, *suffering*, more than any other quality, characterizes what it means to follow Jesus. *Suffering* is the hallmark of obedience to Christ.

And, according to Bonhoeffer, nowhere in Scripture is the suffering of following Christ described as well as Jesus describes it the Beatitudes, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Nowhere in scripture is the link

between suffering and discipleship so clearly made. Nowhere in Scripture is the job description for "disciple" more clearly laid out—

Must be willing to suffer.

A beatitude is just a statement that begins with the word, "blessed." So beatitudes, in general, are statements that describe blessing.

The blessings in the beatitudes of Christ, however, seem to be anything *but* blessings. Because those who are blessed, according to Christ, are those who mourn, those who are poor in spirit, those who are reviled and persecuted—

Those, in other words, who *suffer*.

This of course makes no sense—that suffering means you're blessed. Wouldn't you think that just the *opposite* would be true—that *absence* of suffering would indicate blessing? What's the connection here between *blessing* and *suffering*?

Or, maybe more to the point, how can it be that *suffering* is a *good* thing?

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer defines suffering as "being cut off from God." That is, suffering happens when we turn away from God. Suffering happens, in other words, when we sin.

However, the suffering described in the Beatitudes happens not when we turn away from God, but instead, when we turn *toward* God. The suffering in the Beatitudes happens when we follow Jesus—it happens when we're *obedient* to Christ.

Why is that, do you suppose?

According to Bonhoeffer, the reason why we suffer when we turn toward God is because the only way *out* of suffering is, well ... to *suffer*. In other words, the only way to *not* suffer is *to* suffer.

Bonhoeffer explains this paradox by noting that just as there are two types of

grace—cheap grace and costly grace—there are *also* two types of suffering—non-redemptive suffering, and redemptive suffering.

Non-redemptive suffering is just that—suffering that leads to nothing. There's no payoff with non-redemptive suffering; there's no higher purpose served. It's just suffering for the sake of suffering.

Redemptive suffering, on the other hand, is suffering that ultimately *does* lead to something—it leads to Christ, in whom and through whom all suffering is transcended forever. So, any suffering that's experienced as part of this journey toward union with Christ—any suffering, in other words, that's done in the *name* of Christ—is redemptive. Because this is the suffering that will, eventually, lead us *out* of our suffering.

This is the suffering that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes—the job description for a disciple—*redemptive* suffering. This is the kind of suffering that can actually be good. This is the kind of suffering that's really a blessing. *Redemptive* suffering.

Must be willing to suffer.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer walks us through this job description, point by point, beatitude by beatitude, to help us better understand this relationship between suffering and blessing.

For example: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." According to Bonhoeffer, those who mourn are those who "refuse to be in tune with the world," those who won't "accommodate themselves to the world's standards." Those people—those *disciples*—who mourn for those who refuse to follow Christ, for those who won't obey Christ, for those who are lost—those disciples are *blessed* because they mourn; they're blessed because they suffer for others in the name of Christ.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." A true disciple is one who, according to Bonhoeffer (and Jesus) has renounced all—has renounced *self*—for Christ. Those whose only desire is to humbly, to *meekly*, do the will of God, no matter where it leads them, no matter how hard it is, no matter how painful it is in terms of suffering—those disciples are truly blessed, because they suffer in the name of Christ.

"Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." According to Bonhoeffer, disciples are those who realize that they are not saved by anything they themselves can do; they are saved, instead, by the grace of God. Such people are blessed, says Jesus, because they *will* receive righteousness—the grace of God *will* be theirs—because they suffer at knowing they are undeserving of this grace.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Those who cast aside their own personal dignity and pride, according to Bonhoeffer, are blessed, because their suffering alleviates the suffering of others. Their compassion for others cause them to bear the pain of others, thus alleviating that pain, even as Christ helps them bear their own pain—which makes them blessed.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The "pure in heart," to Bonhoeffer, are "those who have surrendered their hearts completely to Jesus that he may reign in them alone." The "pure in heart" are so emptied of self that all that resides in their hearts is Jesus. All that's there is the love that is God, which they are compelled to share with others. And so the "pure in heart" are blessed.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." Peacemakers, according to Bonhoeffer, are those who renounce violence—those who choose to