

**Suffering and Grace**  
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**First United Methodist Church**  
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Theologian and noted church historian Dr. David Steinmetz said in a lecture that the true definition of Hell is: a morning church committee meeting, with decaffeinated instant coffee, in a foam cup with a wooden stirrer. It doesn't get any worse than that! And I must admit that there are times when I have found myself thinking he was right. These days, we long for the finer things in life like the gourmet coffee stand where we can get our latte, so much so that most new churches being built include a coffee bar as an integral part of their design. We certainly don't want people to experience hell when they are coming to church. Now this is not a bad thing don't get me wrong, anything that brings people to church where they can hear of the love of Christ is fine. So long as it is not the only thing.

The modern world offers us a wonderful opportunity to be more efficient, safe, and streamlined so that we can devote more time to what is important. We don't have to even get out of our pajamas to go to church. We can turn on the television almost any time during the week and watch church. But if we want to be the church, it takes much more than good coffee. It means that we must confront the true hells that we face in our

own lives. It means we must encounter those that are currently living in their own personal hell so that they may be offered hope. Not a hope built on false dreams or successes, but a hope that is built on a foundation of the cross, and calls out through the voice of resurrection, “death is not the final answer.” We as Christians are not so much called to make a difference in the world, but rather to make the world different. That is the message that Jesus has for us in the Sermon on the Plain here in Luke.

Our passage today from 1 Peter reminds us that in life we all experience periods of suffering and grace. Further we are told that all of us are not exempt from suffering but just as important, we can all receive Gods grace. First and most importantly, Jesus deals with those who are suffering. For it is those who are suffering who will first receive grace. And to them he offers a word of hope. Notice throughout the gospels Jesus always goes first to those who are suffering and in pain and offers them hope through healing and assurance that God has not forsaken them. It is only natural then, that those who are in need of hope are the first people he addresses. And in so doing he realizes that there are many forms of hell, both physical and spiritual that they are suffering in. You are not forsaken nor forgotten; instead God has a special place for you. God will pull you out of this hell

you are in and has promised for you a place of great joy. The early church realized this as well, as Peter writes about here, taking his cue from the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans 5:3-5; *And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

Now this is not to trivialize suffering. In no way is Christ content that people should continue in their suffering. This mentality has lead the church in many ways to implicitly condone domestic violence, and child abuse, slavery and spiritual abuse in various forms all in the name of righteous suffering. In all aspects of our lives there is suffering and there is grace but grace does not come as a result of suffering but in spite of suffering. Grace comes in the form of a God who would dare to walk among us and go to those perceived unlovable and to say you are loved and you can be healed and most importantly you do not have to suffer any more.

Jesus did this by example and expected no less from his disciples. And so there is a warning to those who are living comfortably, “ Do not fear what

they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Now before we get defensive, this does deserve some explanation. When we become complacent, and satisfied with what is, we can easily ignore what is not and those who have not. And in the alleviating of suffering through grace is that as Christ reached out to those in need, we too are called to reach out to a sister or a brother who is in need. Because in leaving our comfort zones and experiencing the hells that other people live in their daily lives, we can gain an appreciation for all persons and all creation and we ourselves will not be satisfied with suffering for the sake of suffering but instead spread the message of grace and hope to those who have none. Jesus repeats this theme in the parable of the talents that to those who have much (and take some risk with what they have) much more will be given. We are not put on this world to make a difference but to make the world different.

In his publication *Little Foxes That Spoil the Vines*, W. B. J. Martin tells of reading an article in a religious periodical that caused quite a ruckus: "To Hell With the Church." He confessed to not being able to see why the fuss: "Is not that exactly where the church should go - to hell? William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, evidently thought so, for did he not say in

explanation of his movement, 'I hungered for hell'? He passionately desired to be where evil was most rampant, where there was wrong to be righted, evil to be fought. He chose as his opponents the ugliest and most challenging of foes. But many of us simply do not have the spiritual energy to go to hell, although Christ promised his disciples that the gates of hell should not prevail against them."

--(Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 74.

This doesn't take much for us to encounter the hells that exist in this world. We need only look to the television, and we can see it everyday. We hear stories of abuse and victimization and terrible illness, and famine and fatigue. We see it in our cities with decay and homelessness and drug abuse which Marquette is not immune. We can even see it in the mall as those who are well off wander aimlessly and empty trying to fill the void in their lives with some other product and instead of finding satisfaction only further disappointment. And the only response that the church should have as is quoted from Tim Merrill is "to go to hell." In so doing sin and death can be conquered and Christ mission for the church can be fulfilled. Last month we helped send our own Wesley House students to a place outside of their comfort zone, and their normal routine, to be with those sisters and

brothers in the faith and to bring a message of hope but also to be filled with hope themselves. Others can do it through their witness of love and hope by being a friend to a stranger, visiting the sick, and extending the right hand of fellowship. For through our actions all will experience grace by offering hope in the form of meeting physical need but also being spiritually fulfilled. For where ever we go as the body of Christ, God will be with us and all will know that grace that comes from living life in communion with each other in Christ Jesus.