

Scripture

John 12:20-33

Meditation **Do we see the righteousness in our suffering?**

Pastor Riva Tabelisma

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

Last Wednesday, we were shocked with a news that a white person was having a bad day, and that went to three spas, and went on a killing rampage. There were a lot of news that he was fighting an addiction. On March 20, 2020, the former president of this country labeled the corona virus a Chinese virus. A rhetoric that fuelled harmful attacks to Asians living here in the US. But wait, this discrimination against Asians did not just happen these past couple of years. In 1871, 17 Chinese men and boys were lynched. In 1880s the Congress passed the Exclusion Act to ban Chinese immigration for 20 years but was eventually stretched to 60 years. The Japanese interment was enforced where tens of thousands of Japanese were sent to camps as the US government's retaliation for the bombing that occurred in Pearl Harbor. Let us not forget the discrimination of the Muslims as an effect of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, that stretched into many years after. Asians, whether American citizens or not are marginalized and minimized. But as Asians, we were taught since our younger years that what hurts us makes us stronger. And being people that was largely colonized, we were taught that there is righteousness in our suffering.

In the recent months and even years, discrimination has been very apparent in our society. Black lives needed to be lifted because the suffering is palpable, as what we are witnessing in the trial that is happening. In 2019, our own UMC decided that it does not see the humanity of the LGBTQ folks when the General Conference voted for the Traditional Plan. The saddest part in all of these sufferings is that it is already the 21st century...the time that we are supposed to be modernized...or as other folks will say it...post-modern era.

In the earlier Christian tradition, the focus of the Lenten season is the suffering of Jesus. It was preached that because Jesus suffered for our sins, we should be focused on that suffering. I remember when I was growing up, my grandma will always say, I cannot laugh loud during the Holy Week, that people should be somber and sad because it is inappropriate to be happy when remembering the suffering of Jesus. It sounds funny. And so goes too when I hear my parents planning. Happier/more upbeat/joyful hymns can only be sung on Easter Sunday and so forth. Then after seminary, I realized that the hymns are selected depending on their relevance to the scripture. My point is, the focus of the narrative for the Lenten season is always about the suffering of Christ, and by internalizing this, we were conditioned that suffering a part of life. That by suffering, we get closer to God's glory. This is the narrative that the people in power adapted and used this as a justification for imposing harm and abusing those who are weak, helpless and the voiceless. Other than this has become a justification for injustice to happen in our society, there is another dilemma that I see in this narrative. This is my dilemma how can a loving and merciful God allow suffering to happen to God's beloved creation? If God loves all that God created, why would God tolerate pain and suffering to happen? This is probably a question that can be posted to folks who are still using the narrative of achieving righteousness in suffering, especially if this message is coming from the oppressor themselves, especially when God's name is imploded in the suffering.

There is no doubt that Jesus suffered a lot. His death was violent, brutal even. But we all know that Jesus is already a righteous person. He embodied righteousness even before he had to suffer. We remember the suffering of Jesus in a great deal, but we also need to focus on his whole life and ministry as a whole. We also have to consider that when Jesus talked about his death, he did not welcome it. But he accepted it as well, after receiving validation from God. Even after the fact that he has been chosen. Another compelling part in this passage is the judgment of the world that was mentioned in verse 31. The two important words to focus here are 'world' and 'judgement'. New Testament scholars clarified that the 'world' that was mentioned here is not synonymous to the 'world' that God created. Rather, this is the fallen dimension that has alienated its relationship with God. A Bible commentator said that the 'world' that is mentioned in this passage is the 'system' driven by a spirit or force whose ways are domination, violence, and death. This is the 'system' that imposes pain and suffering on people, encouraging and justifying the harm inflicted on the weak. This is the reason why God is imposing 'judgement' of this world and the need to drive out the ruler of this 'world'. This part of today's passage reconciles my understanding of a gracious, merciful, and loving God. This is the God that I am serving.

The life of Jesus was a constant struggle to fight the 'system' that continues to inflict harm and suffering on people. If we are to read this in our context, the 'system' that we are seeing is the claws of racism that are very rampant and imminent in our society. I personally believe that if Jesus was alive in our time, he will be condemning this 'system' of racial injustice that is happening all around us. And this is what we need to condemn as followers of God. Having a relationship with Jesus means two things: (1) that we have a relationship with Jesus, he is our Savior; and (2) having said that, as people who receive God's grace, we should live our lives that embody of the Savior that we are preaching we have a relationship with.

I would like to invite you to broaden the scope of the journey of the cross and shift our focus from concentrating on the suffering of Jesus to looking at the suffering of the people around us and God's creation. And as we shift our gaze of the suffering, let us also continue to fight and condemn the world which embraces the system that promotes hate, pain and harm. We see this with how a police officer knelt on a black person's neck in Minneapolis, we see this in the face of a Filipino American from San Francisco, California whose face was slashed for no apparent reason, we see this in the lives of the Muslim Americans who at a snap of a finger cannot come back to their houses in the US because of a travel ban that was imposed to their country of birth, and most recently, Asian women killed because a white guy wanted to overcome his addiction. Let us fight and condemn the system that allows this to happen. Let us fight and condemn the system that thinks that there are groups of people are better than others. Let us condemn the system that uses pain and harm as ammunition against what is considered the other. As Asians, we were told that there is righteousness in our suffering. But this has to stop. Our righteousness comes from God alone, not from the power that the world dictates, not from the color of one's skin, and definitely, not from the suffering of those who are the minority. May it be so. Amen.