

Sermon: On Strength After Suffering (Laurel)

When I first started seminary a whole ten, maybe twelve, years ago I thought theology was kind of boring. I even went so far as to say this to my academic advisor. Bless her for keeping a straight face. I was interested in people and how we operate, how community changes us and the world. And I thought that wasn't theology.

I have changed my mind on the theology front. Despite the word suggesting it's only about god, I now think of theology as the systems of meaning and beliefs and values hidden in our lives. So it's actually really important to look at those systems of meaning and beliefs and values, because they inform how we live and how we establish our priorities, they are also deeply bound up with issues of power.

So. Today we're going to consider two theological frames, two ways of looking at the world to make meaning after traumatic or violent events. The first is redemptive suffering theology and the second is post-traumatic growth. And we're going to go looking for the power and the ideas of what is good in both. As always, I'm not going to tell stories of specific violent things.

Let's start with redemptive suffering theology. I'm willing to bet that the term is new to many or most of you, but the thing itself is not. I'm sure we're all familiar with the phrase "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." We've heard this right, be it in a Kelly Clarkson song, or the praise we receive for having endured some great suffering. "That experience made you so much stronger."

How many of you have been on the receiving end of that kind of praise? It always makes my skin crawl. Yes, it is possible to develop greater resilience or strength or wisdom after suffering - we're going to get there in a minute. But let's really examine this redemptive suffering thing first.

The term "redemptive suffering" quite literally means that we are redeemed by suffering. So something was wrong with us, we encountered some kind of violence or harm, and then we were redeemed! Gross, right?

Because implicit in this framework is the idea that violence is purifying, and whoever has suffered needed to be purified. That horrific thing that happened to you, it made you cleaner, it made you better. So if you are violent towards someone, it's to teach them a lesson, it's for their betterment.

Do you see how dangerous this can be? Can you see how the power is operating in this? How improvement is forced upon us by an outside power that is fully justified in its use of violence? How that violence or traumatic loss is framed as if it's kindness?

What if we take that idea and scale it up. Move beyond the one-to-one of a person to person dynamic, and apply this idea to a bigger population.

What if we let redemptive suffering theology inform how we teach American history? I'm sure many of you heard about how Florida was trying to make schools teach that slavery was good for enslaved people because it gave them job skills. That's redemptive suffering on a communal scale.

Or what if we scale up even further - what if an entire nation is justified in their use of violence because the violence is purifying the land of something or someone it has deemed undesirable, less human.

Redemptive suffering theology is a necessary cog in the machine of colonialism and imperialism. It not only justifies harm and disempowers on the individual personal level, it also lives at the heart of genocide and ethnic cleansing. I hope it is clear that I am fundamentally and wholly against redemptive suffering theology.

It is also true that we can develop greater wisdom and insight after traumatic experiences - this on the surface sounds similar to redemptive suffering. But let's go looking for the power dynamic.

Post-traumatic wisdom was a term developed by mental health practitioners that describes the phenomenon of people experiencing greater wisdom or clarity, a deeper sense of meaning, after a traumatic event or events. Post-traumatic wisdom

does not always occur but it is possible.

Within this frame, where does the power lie? Where does the positive change come from? It's internal. It's the power of the human spirit, that source of life that lives inside us, that we experience in relationship with those around us.

As Brianna West says in our reading: "The healing is how you gradually allow your own soul to drip into your days again."

Even on a purely physical level, the strength of our bodies is not imparted upon us by the dumbbell lifted or the distance run, strength is created when our bodies knit themselves back together in response to stress. The strength is in the knitting of muscle, in the growing back into wholeness, not in the breaking.

If post traumatic growth is possible, it means that violence doesn't have the last word. It means that we don't need to be purified in order to be good. Goodness is inherent and it is always possible.

We also know from research on trauma that having meaningful connections with others is key to healing. We know that care and kindness can transform the physiology of a traumatized body.

Do you see how this is a very different way of making meaning?

There's also more room inside this framework, because we've disconnected growth from this idea of cause and effect. It is true that sometimes horrible things happen, or are done to us, and there is no meaningful outcome that we can articulate. That's okay. Healing takes time. Making meaning takes time. We know from the impacts of intergenerational trauma that sometimes it takes lifetimes to digest violence.

Post-traumatic growth is neither a given, nor is it required. You don't have to be an inspiration story. It's okay if you haven't mined some golden nugget out of that unspeakable thing. Sometimes the hard thing is just hard. Please don't compound it with guilt or expectation or shame. The voice telling you that you should have something to show for that horrible thing, that's redemptive suffering talking and we get to say no.

Post-traumatic wisdom reminds us that the suffering doesn't ultimately control us.

In a post traumatic wisdom way of looking at the world, the thing with ultimate power to remake the world is not violence, it's connection, it's care, it's life's insistence on returning and love's refusal to break.

Let's scale that up. I think of the old words from Mr. Rogers "when bad things happen, look for the helpers." I think of communities rallying to care for each other after catastrophe. I think of parents whose children were killed in school shootings standing up to lawmakers and lobbyists, insisting on change. I invite you to notice these kinds of moments in the world around you.

Post-traumatic growth at scale is world building, it's infusing life and an ethic of love back into the broken places.

We have these two theological frames - one that holds violence as an ultimate power for good, and one that holds love and care and kindness as an ultimate power for good. And I invite you to notice them as you move through the world. Notice when redemptive suffering is being invoked and wonder why.

And I invite you to consciously try to shift to a framework built around an ethic of love. This is the task of faithful living: noticing where we align our own power and our own lives and course-correcting when we stray from our deepest values.

I've come to know that theology is not some dusty boring relic, it's the beating heart at the center of how we live and thrive.

Amen.

Reference books:

Proverbs of Ashes

What Happened to You?

What My Bones Know