



Suffering

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The March theme is Suffering.

In the Cold War-era comedy “Romanoff & Juliet,” which was both a Broadway play and a movie, there’s a young Soviet naval officer who falls for an American woman and agonizes over the diplomatic predicament his heart has created. In a moment of particularly high angst, he declares to another character, “You have never suffered!” And the laid-back character responds: “No, and I don’t intend to.”

That brief bit of dialogue has stayed with me since I first heard it decades ago because it shows two very different approaches to personal suffering: suffering as core to identity, and suffering as something other people do.

Are we all born to suffer?

Buddhism would say yes. The Four Noble Truths affirm that suffering is a part of life, and that desire is the source of suffering. The Eightfold Path leads away from suffering, through methods such as Right Action and Right Mindfulness. Suffering is the organizing problem of Buddhism, much in the same way that sin and death are the organizing problems of Christianity.

And for many Christians, the solution to those problems is the suffering of Jesus Christ. Because suffering is seen to have redemptive properties in Christianity, “suffering is something that is both inevitable and welcome – something to be confronted rather than avoided,” Jack Bemporad writes in the Encyclopedia of Religion. Jesus’ suffering mirrors that of every person, and believers might see in Christ’s

suffering hope for their own salvation.

But Christianity is so broad that opinions have varied over time and continue to do so. Martin Luther was among those who focused on the resurrection, not the suffering on the cross, as the source of human atonement. And Bishop Yvette Flunder, a United Church of Christ minister who spoke in the Twin Cities last month, does not think that suffering imposed by some groups on others is redemptive. Rather, such avoidable suffering becomes “deified” as a virtue – often by those who “don’t intend to” suffer themselves.

Humanists tend to focus on alleviating suffering. Many theists have a theological imperative to do so as well, and many experience additional questions about God’s role. Can God’s power and love be reconciled with human suffering? Does God suffer? William Ellery Channing, an early Unitarian leader, argued that Christ was fully human in part because God could not and would not suffer as Jesus did.

Human suffering is sometimes seen as the result of human failure, of wrongdoing. But Judaism and Christianity point out that suffering also can be the result of living the right way. History contains countless stories of those who have suffered for their virtues.

Islam takes a different path. Bemporad writes: “In Islam, suffering is not a welcome way of proving one’s faith, as in Christianity; neither is it something that should be avoided wherever possible, as in Judaism. Rather, Islam

sees suffering as a necessary though unfortunate component of [human] life that should be alleviated where possible and endured otherwise.”

Suffering is thought of as inspiration for great art – Picasso’s “Guernica,” for example, with its images of agony from the Spanish Civil War, bears witness to the pain of both the artist and the people of Spain, and the Holocaust informs Elie Wiesel’s body of writing. But cannot other human experiences – love, for example – be equally intense muses?

The ability to deal with suffering can be seen as a dimension of spiritual maturity. The spiritual questions for us in our time might be: How do we stay awake and open in the face of so much suffering in our lives and in our world? How do we put our pain in context? Is suffering the response to pain, and how much agency do we have in how we respond? Is the suffering itself ever transformed, or is it the catalyst for other transformations?

In our post-modern world, where medicine and technology and prosperity have reduced many kinds of suffering, suffering still persists on a heartbreaking scale. And so, too, do our questions.

— Jim Foti, Ministerial Intern

For resources on the March theme of suffering, please turn to page 5.