

Choosing Suffering and Death

Malachi 3:19-20a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:7-12

Luke 21:5-19

As the Church calendar and liturgical year come to an end each November, our Scripture readings focus on the traditional “four last things”—death, judgment, heaven and hell. Last week, my homily was on the resurrection of our bodies, which fit very well with the theme of the “four last things.” This week, I am going to continue in that theme and invite us to look at the importance of *choosing* suffering and death.

One of the biggest misconceptions in life is the belief that we have *no choice* in the suffering we experience and *no choice* in our inevitable death. In reality, we *do have a choice* in both of these matters and it is a very important choice! Let’s look at the choice that is inherent in suffering first and then we’ll look at our choice in dying.

CHOOSING SUFFERING

Most of us appropriately try to *avoid* suffering. We don’t try to provoke it or search for it. Yet, we cannot avoid suffering; it’s part of life. Therefore, most of us have resigned ourselves to *tolerating* suffering. In this way, suffering is for most of us something that happens *to* us, victimizing us, and robbing us of things we value, like health, life, love, blessings, and other people.

Father Jacques Philippe, in his book, Interior Freedom, explains that when our focus is on tolerating suffering, then the suffering remains something that *takes* things from us. However, we can freely choose to change our suffering into something we *offer*. There is a real difference between suffering that is tolerated and suffering that is offered. Father Philippe explains this difference writing, “Externally there is no visible difference, but internally everything is transfigured: fate into free choice, constraint into love, loss into fruitfulness” (pg. 57). Saint Therese the Little Flower learned about this transfiguration at an early age.

The life of a Carmelite nun is not an easy one; it involves a very full schedule of prayer and work. Saint Therese hated being interrupted by other sisters while she was busy working. While it would have been easy to merely tolerate the other sisters’ interruptions or even to become resentful of them, Saint Therese chose to pray every morning to be interrupted. It was her conscious way of *choosing* her suffering and offering it up to God. Her time was no longer something *taken* from her by the demands of other sisters, but *freely* and *lovingly* given.

No matter what suffering you and I are going through right now in our lives, we can let it transform us by making it an offering and choosing to love more deeply. A very similar thing is true about choosing death.

CHOOSING DEATH

Since I am afraid of heights, I didn't ride my first rollercoaster until I was in my mid-twenties. I made sure the first was a good one—the “Texas Giant” at Six Flags Over Texas. When it opened in 1990, the “Texas Giant” was the highest wooden rollercoaster in the world—143 feet! As the cars began their initial climb to the top, I remember thinking, “They have got to stop this ride! I can't do it!!!” However, it was too late; the ride was inevitable. I no longer had a choice as to whether or not to ride the rollercoaster. The only choice I had left was to either enjoy the ride or be overwhelmed with panic and fear.

Death is a lot like a rollercoaster ride—the instant that we are conceived, the ride begins. Death, then, is inevitable. Inevitability, however, does not exclude freedom and choice, but it does *change* the object of our freedom and choice. While we don't have a choice about whether or not to die, we do have a choice regarding our disposition and acceptance of death. We can either enjoy the ride or be overwhelmed with panic and fear. We can either learn to let go of the things of this world, and grow in freedom, or we can cling hopelessly to the inevitability of having to give everything up in death and grow more and more resentful.

One of the greatest tools that God uses to help us learn to let go of this life and grow in freedom is the aging process. Growing old can help us to accept the inevitability of death with peace and joy, if we allow it. Abbot Jerome Kodell, in his book, Life Lessons from the Monastery, explains this, writing—

The project of this life is to learn how to turn over control to the Creator so that we may have the interior freedom to leave this world in peace and be ready for new life with God. If we haven't been able to surrender before our body begins breaking down, the gradual reduction of our abilities gives us a new opportunity before we die.

-pg. 122

This week, I encourage us to take some time to meditate on the presence and role of suffering and death in our lives. There is great freedom and peace in learning how to choose suffering and death rather than being victimized by them.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ We might ask ourselves the questions, “Is suffering something that I have merely *tolerated*, which may have made me angry and resentful, or is it something that I have *chosen*?” “How often do I meditate on the inevitability of my death?” “In what ways has God been challenging me to let go of the things of this world so as to desire more deeply the things of heaven?”