

How Your Suffering Can Result in a God-Given Spiritual Gift

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Rom. 8:35).

There are times when the personal suffering endured by people is so immense, so deep that it violates our limited capacity to comprehend. *Seeing* suffering does something to a person’s soul—but only if the person who is suffering is seen as a human being.

When a person is not seen as a human being, he or she is not seen as capable of suffering. It has long bothered me that all of us hurt others at various times in our lives. For most of us, once we are aware that we have hurt someone or that we are causing another to suffer, we stop what we are doing. We feel a sense of shame or guilt.

But when we see another person as an object, the dispensation of pain that causes suffering is not of importance to us. Through cognitive dissonance, we continue to inflict pain on others and think nothing of it; it is as though that person, or that group of people, is no more than bark on a tree. We lose our humanity, which includes the natural capacity to recognize and acknowledge suffering. When we treat others as inhuman, we become inhuman ourselves.

James Baldwin wrote, “People who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach” (James Baldwin, *The*

Fire Next Time, 99).

What is this gift we receive through suffering? It is none other than faith—a faith not based on religion but on the persistence within our souls to survive. Those who have endured instances of personal suffering receive the gift, but those who, as a people or a group, have endured such suffering for generations, have received this gift in an amount that even we do not and cannot understand. The spiritual strength, determination and stamina of those who have endured and survived social suffering is like a precious metal or jewel, though, if the truth be told, we would rather not have had to receive either.

When we grow frustrated with God's apparent absence and/or silence in the face of evil in our society, we sometimes turn away from God. It might be safe to say that by fighting against racism in this country, many of our strongest warriors turned to and away from God at the same time. While they knew it was only their faith in God that would empower them to engage in their fight for justice, they were also confounded by what they perceived as an impotent form of Christianity, a religion practiced by white believers that demanded respect of a God who apparently had no respect for them or their people.

People like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Rosa Parks, Nannie Helen Burroughs and others fiercely held on to God while simultaneously rejecting certain forms of Christianity. In holding on to God, even though they could not understand how and why God would allow such suffering, they received the strength to stay on their course.

Because too many people have become inhuman, treating other groups of people as objects, social suffering will continue. Because of that fact, many more people will grow frustrated, angry and confused by God, and even turn away.

We might do well to remember that because of God with us,

“Emmanuel,” we have made it through some heinous experiences. We have “grown up,” in Baldwin’s words. We must pray that more people would lose their fear of turning toward God, and thus, develop “ears that hear and eyes that see” (Prov. 20:12a, NIV). But at the end of the day, we must thank God for the fact that, as the gospel song says, God has “kept me, so I wouldn’t let go.”

To God be the glory. {eo}

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