

**Ninth Sunday After Pentecost**  
**July 17, 2016**  
**Marley United Methodist Church, Glen Burnie MD**

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Amos 8: 1-12  
Psalm 52  
Colossians 1: 15-28\*  
Luke 10: 38-42\*

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**The Cost of Discipleship**

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen

There was something rather shocking in the reading from Colossians this morning. Did you catch it? “I fill up in my physical body. . .what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.” It is not too often in the Bible that you will find a suggestion that there was anything lacking or deficient in what Jesus Christ did. In fact, most of us find such a suggestion to be shocking.

What you will normally find in the Bible, and in traditional Christian theology, and most certainly in Paul’s writings, are statements that insistently proclaim that the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ is solely sufficient for our salvation – that nothing else is necessary or even desirable – nowhere else is it said that anything needs to be added. And nowhere in Scripture is that said more clearly than in Paul’s letter to the Galatians – there is no need to add anything to what God has already done in Jesus Christ.

Earlier in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Colossians we hear something that sounds more familiar.

“<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation,  
<sup>16</sup> for all things in heaven and on earth were created in him – all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether

principalities or powers – all things were created through him and for him.  
<sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him.”

Now, that describes the Christ we know and love. Most Biblical scholars think that was probably a hymn that was sung in the early church and that the author is quoting the hymn. Whether or not that is the case, it is a good example of the “Christ is everything and more” statements that we expect from the Bible.

Having just read those verses, it comes as a bit of a shock when just a few verses later we find the one and only time in the entire New Testament that the word “deficient” or “lacking” is used with reference to the actions of Christ. In verse 24, the writer says he is glad that he is suffering for the sake of the church, well OK so far, God knows someone needs to suffer for what has been done in the name of the church, but then he goes on to say that in his suffering he is completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. Wow!!

Are we really to believe that we need to suffer to make up for some insufficiency in Christ’s sufferings?

Frankly, I don’t have the time or space (or in fact the knowledge) to deal with all the complexities of the theological and doctrinal arguments that rise up around that. But I can touch on a couple of reasons for thinking that this rather bizarre statement isn’t completely off the chart and that the thought expressed here does have some important implications for our life, our prayers and the ministry of the church.

There are some technicalities about the words used that are important, although I won’t bore you with the full details – this is after all, a sermon, not a Bible study.

The most important technicality, though, is that when the text speaks of what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions, the word translated “afflictions” is a different word from the one usually used to refer to the “sufferings” through which Christ achieved our salvation. The Greek ‘afflictions’ is a word that is never used to refer to Christ’s passion.

But it is a word which appears elsewhere in the Bible when discussing the trials and tribulations that will be visited on the earth as the end of the age approaches. In other words, the thing that Colossians says was left incomplete by Christ was not the thing that brings about our salvation.

So what in Sam Hill are they talking about???

There are several answers to that question available in the *smorgasbord* of Christian theology. There is, for example an ancient idea that there was a certain amount of ‘affliction’ that God’s faithful people had to suffer before the end could come, as if God were sitting up there watching us and toting up the bill, withholding his presence until the suffering quotient of his people had gotten high enough to pay the bill.

That idea still lives within those who believe there will be a Tribulation before the Rapture. I once had a parishioner who at age 55 was in excellent health and he was very distressed about that—you see, because had no afflictions, he was afraid that maybe God didn’t love him. (He did finally worry himself into a heart attack and then he felt better.)

Well, if that kind of idea did lay behind this verse — and I’m not convinced that it does — but if it did it would make some sense, because it would be saying that Christ personally bore a disproportionately large share of those afflictions, but there is a fair bit left for the church to bear to ‘finish’ the work. It may make sense, but this is not a belief that is well supported either in scripture or in subsequent Christian thinking, so we’d best hesitate before we decide to understand and respond to this verse with that mindset. Frankly, I don’t buy it.

What seems to make more sense to me is this--the afflictions the writer of Colossians talks about are incurred in the course of faithful witness to the truth of God’s love in Christ. The writer is not suggesting that he is somehow making atonement for the sins of the world, but neither is he talking about his ingrown toenail or the after effects of too many chili peppers the night before.

He is talking about the very real blowback anyone who tries to live a life in Christ will experience from a world that is just as eager to crucify him now as they were back then.

The church's mission of witnessing to Jesus and reconciling the world and its people to God is incomplete. And until it is completed on the last day, then the afflictions that will be incurred in the process of that work will continue.

What Jesus achieved in breaking the power of sin and death was utterly unique and complete--no one else can add to it. It is sufficient for our salvation. We participate in it as we live a life in Christ. We acknowledge that reality every time we gather around the baptismal font or at this table, but we can't add to it or do anything to make it more complete or more adequate.

However, what Jesus suffered in the course of standing for truth and love against the forces of deceit and oppression, was not unique. If only it had been! The Bible is full of stories of faithful witnesses who suffered persecution, abuse and even murder for their courageous commitment to God and God's ways.

The history of the church since the close of the scriptures is equally full of such examples. And as long as the forces of greed and callous self-interest are competing for control of the earth's peoples and resources, those who stand up in defense of mercy and justice will pay a price for their love and courage.

The church's work is to bring the whole world to Christ, who has provided us with the only way to be reconciled to our creator and to the wholeness of life for which we were created. I doubt there is anyone here who would claim the church's work has been completed. There is much yet to be done—and God will do it working through faithful disciples who are willing to take up their cross and follow him.

So when the writer of Colossians describes himself as suffering on behalf of the church and in some sense reducing their suffering by taking it on

himself, I suspect that he is making a simple and valid point. Those who take the highest profile roles in witnessing to the Kingdom of God will attract the greatest hostility and abuse. I don't think the writer of Colossians is making any messianic claims. He is simply acknowledging that injustice is never going to deal itself out equally!

I am also sure that everyone here will agree we all share in the task of announcing using our words and in our lived reality – announce the good news of God's love and our freedom in Christ. Which means, my friends, we will all share, albeit unequally, in suffering the rejection, hostility and abuse of those whose interests are threatened by it.

Our fractured world is so fearful and unstable that it is consistently resorts to a tried and true self-preservation tactic – it tries to create a security by forming the only unity it can – the kind of unity that points a finger at others and bays for their blood from the cowardly unity of a mob.

And whenever it happens that a group of people begin to accuse another group of people of being somehow 'wrong', Jesus steps between the victim and the mob and says, "Love your neighbor". And who is your neighbor?; everyone, even the despised and feared and outcast. Even the one everyone else wants to run out of town or kick out of the country.

Love God, love your neighbor and love your enemy. And when it is your turn to step between a mob and its victim and witness for love without limit and without boundaries, you more often than not will end up bringing the wrath of the mob down on your own head. Yet still Jesus, who knows that only too well, says 'Which one was a neighbor?--the one who had mercy on the victim. Go and do likewise.'

And it is not only between the victim and the 'bad guys' that we need to intervene – there is a lesson to be learned from the story of Mary and Martha as well. Martha is busy doing good, but she is taken to task for criticizing Mary who does not allow herself to be distracted by 'being busy doing good' and rather focusing her attention on the message of Jesus. Just so, it is for us to keep our eye on the 'real' issue and not be seduced into

staying busy looking for a quick fix or putting a band-aid on a problem whose seriousness requires something much more radical.

We do this when we use terms like 'gun violence'. It leads us to put the blame on guns and not on the sin-sick mind-set that breeds the fear, anger and despair that leads to violence.

Before you slam shut the door in your mind, please hear me out for a moment – in the 1920s we, as a society, set out on a very noble and well-intentioned campaign to stop the terrible tragedy of alcohol abuse. We outlawed alcohol – and you know how well that worked. Alcohol wasn't the problem, the social structures that led people to seek oblivion and self-destruction were the problem and we never addressed those. We tried to sweep it under the rug by being busy doing good.

Adam and Eve ate the apple. So shall we outlaw apples?

Cain killed Able. We don't know how exactly but Cain was a farmer so shall we outlaw farm implements, like shovels, rakes and sickles?

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Shall we then outlaw colorful clothing?

I suggest that outlawing guns will not solve the problem of violence in our society – granted, I personally see little use for automatic, semi-automatic or assault weapons outside of the military, but even if they were outlawed it would not stop the violence. If the Dallas sniper had not had guns he would have used explosives.

On October 13, 2010, Al-Quida's online English magazine contained a list of actions jihadis could take – one item on the list was 'ram cars into crowds'. (<https://www.jihadwatch.org/2010/10/al-qaeda-ram-cars-into-crowds-for-allah>)

Protestors in St. Paul, MN, on Saturday, July 9, threw pieces of rebar, bottles of frozen water, rocks, cinder blocks, fireworks and Molotov cocktails at the police – shall we begin a campaign to outlaw those items as

well? Or perhaps, in light of what happened in France on Thursday night we should add trucks to the list?

To suggest that outlawing guns will stop the violence is a little like suggesting that the solution to highway deaths is to outlaw cars – you know, more than 3 times as many people are killed every year by cars than by guns.

Am I being a little silly – of course, I'm not serious about outlawing these things – outlawing things doesn't help – it only distracts us from addressing the real cause of the violence.

I suggest to you that both sides of the gun debate are allowing themselves to be distracted from the root causes of violence and are missing the point – and when we allow ourselves to fixate on outlawing weapons we jump on the bandwagon of mob-think – we become distracted and miss the calling which Christ gave his church – which is to minister to, and heal, the sin-sickness of the human soul and the societal structures that breed fear, anger and violence.

I am horrified by what has happened in these and too many other events – my heart goes out to the family and friends of the victims. I know those officers in Dallas and the victims in France and all the others who have died or suffered injury are human beings and our brothers and sisters – but so are those who did the killing, whether we like it or not. And my heart goes out to the mother and father of Micah Johnson who have to accept that their son was blown to pieces in a parking garage because he had done the unthinkable. Do you think their pain is any less than any of the other victim's families?

Who is your neighbor? Certainly, those who are killed but so are those who do the killing, both are victims of sin and evil. To focus on the guns and ignore the human catastrophe that leads a person to commit violence does absolutely nothing to cure or fix the problem. It only serves to further divide us over yet another political issue and thus keep us from tending to the business of God's kingdom.

I am suggesting that we also need to realize that the killers are themselves victims of sin-sickness and evil and any 'solution' which denies them healing is also evil in the sight of God. The only realistic target for a solution is the healing of the human soul.

The root cause of these tragedies of lives lost and lives wasted is sin, and sin-sickness, and the societal structures that promote and foster fear, anger, hatred and, yes, violence. The cause of all this is in the human soul and we are supposed to be the ones with the solution to that in and through Jesus Christ.

Jesus put his body on the line to reconcile us with God and each other and when we are united to him in baptism, we become his body. We are the body of Christ which means we too are to be broken bread for others – we too are to be poured out wine so that others may be forgiven their sin. In this room, around this font and around this table we experience the very brokenness which is Christ on the cross which in and of itself becomes the source of healing and nourishment: strengthening us and filling us with hope for the journey – a journey into the fullness of a life lived in a world reconciled to itself and to its God: a life which is free of fear, anger and violence.

There is a storm coming, if it is not already here. The love of God through Christ will prevail against that storm. But it IS our mission to stand before that storm. It is for us to step between all of the victims and the mob-think bandwagon, no matter how well intentioned it is. It is for us to avoid being distracted.

And the extent to which we are able to do that will put us on the outs with most of the people around us. But that is the cost of discipleship.

Amen