

Sermon for March 18, 2018
Series: Love Starts Here
“Love Starts Here: Suffering”

Hebrews 5:5-10

Aldersgate has some beautiful stained glass windows. In fact, before I came here one of the members of the Palmetto Moravian Fellowship, after hearing that I was coming here, brought me an article about your stained-glass windows. Even in Spartanburg they are known about! I have always loved the way that stained glass art uses not just color, but light to give life to an image. One of the other churches I served also had beautiful stained glass windows. The main window was over the entrance to the church and it depicted Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a very large window about 8’ by 5’ and it was lit up from behind at night so that all could see it. The church was on one of the main streets in the little town of Belton. So many people saw the window. In fact, when I was about to move there, some of the members of the church I was serving in Antreville were discussing which church it was. One said “Oh, it’s the church with the window!” Her husband had died of cancer and she had driven by that church repeatedly at night while making the trek from Antreville to one of the Greenville hospitals when he was there. She had stopped at that traffic light in front of the church and been inspired by the window.

That church also happened to be across the street from the Funeral Home in town. Almost every night of the week there was a visitation going on there. And as you came out the front door of the Funeral Home what did you see but this window of Jesus praying lit up. Many people were touched and comforted and inspired by that window. It was a witness to the world of the love of God in Jesus Christ, so please don’t misunderstand what I am about to say.

It’s not realistic. Perhaps the role of the artist is to transcend the real and reveal something deeper, and so we can applaud this stained glass artists’ efforts. But that’s not what it was like at all. The Bible tells us that “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.” I don’t see any tears or loud cries here. In other places we are told that Jesus was in great anguish and even sweat drops of blood. Where are the blood, sweat, and tears in this picture?

You may know the story, but let me refresh your memory. It was the night before Jesus was crucified. Jesus had just had his last supper with his disciples. During the meal he broke the bread and said, “This is my body.” He poured the wine and said, “This is my Blood.” And Judas left to betray him.

After the dinner Jesus went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. When he got there Jesus asked Peter, James and John to pray with him because he was troubled. They fell asleep and would not pray with him. So Jesus prayed alone.

What did he pray? He prayed “Let this cup pass from me not my will but yours be done.” He knew that the cross awaited him and “he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.” He also prayed for his disciples; that God would protect them and help them. He even prayed for all who would believe because of their witness: that includes us.

Last week we talked about Love starting with God's love for us. Here we see that love on display as Jesus surrendered himself to suffer for us. Love starts here with Jesus' suffering. And sometimes that love calls us to suffer for others just as he suffered for us.

But when Hebrews speaks of Jesus "lifting up prayer and petitions," the Garden of Gethsemane was not the only time and place that Jesus prayed. Jesus often went off on his own to pray. At times he would rise early in the morning to pray. At other times he would intentionally try to shake off the crowds to pray. He also prayed in relation to times of healing.

What did Jesus pray on those occasions? Often we are not told what Jesus prayed. Here was Jesus the only begotten Son of God – God come in the flesh. And he felt a need to pray.

If Jesus needed to pray, then we certainly need to. The fact that "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death," is important. It is an example for us that we need to pray.

The fact that Jesus "offered up prayers and petitions" teaches us that we should pray, but Jesus was doing more than giving us an example to follow. He was actually feeling the need to talk to his Father. Our lesson said "During the days of Jesus' life on earth..." Jesus lived a human life. He experienced our trials and troubles. He felt human pains and shortcomings just like us.

I think those things often escape us. We think: he is the Son of God, what does he know of pain? What does he know of troubles? Yet he did know those things. His prayers were "with loud cries and tears." I don't know about you but most of the time I spend praying is quiet. The only times I have prayed with "loud cries and tears" was when I was going through something very hard: illness or death of a family member or an illness of my own.

Jesus has been there. Because he has been there, he can be our great high priest. That's what it means when it says "and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek." Melchizedek was a priest for God in the Old Testament before there was an Israel. He interceded with God for all peoples of the world. In the same manner Jesus intercedes for the whole world.

What are your pains and troubles? Problems with relationships, troubles with work. Are you alienated from ones you love? Are you lacking direction? Are you facing illness or death? Are you feeling weak?

Jesus understands. He understands because he suffered. He was tempted: to turn stones into bread, to let the cup pass even though it would not have been his Father's will. He knew fear: the fear of feeling nails driven through his hands and feet, the fear of experiencing the sins of the world laid on him.

You think you have problems? Take a good long look at Jesus. You can take your troubles to him. He suffered and died to take away your sin and give you eternal life.

We don't worship a stained glass Jesus. We worship a Jesus who went through blood, sweat and tears. We serve a Jesus who was betrayed and abandoned. In love he suffered, and I think he can handle hearing about all our troubles and he can even help us bear our burdens! Love starts here: Suffering.