

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 2025
LENT MESSAGE: HOW SUFFERING CAN SAVE US
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How Suffering Can Save Us

“Okagesama De: Because of You”

When I met with the Michi, Stella Wakamatsu’s daughter to plan for the Stella’s memorial service, we talked of Stella’s long life of faithfulness to God, family and friends. One phrase that Michi shared that seemed to capture Stella’s heart and way was, Okagesama de, which she translated as, Because of you. When someone would thank Stella, share how helpful or good she was, she would say “because of you”, and I remember how she would point up to God, saying “because of You God”. This has stayed with ever since, it seems like the heart of our devoted gratefulness in what ever we face in life, the joys, celebrations and the struggles and suffering to look to Christ, and remember in thought and prayer, Because of You, Christ, You are here, I have hope and I am loved.

Today I am sharing about suffering, not something I easily embrace or even like actually, but who does. I have learned so much especially over these past seven and half years through the losses of my brother, Dave, Bev, my wife’s journey through cancer and her final passing, my Dad’s passing, my step-mother, and in this past year my Mom and Mother in law.

These losses has brought suffering to me up close and personal. It’s not that I have not had struggles or suffering, its just that much of my life, from my family and such we just didn’t pause much in the pain and instead, mostly just pushed through, kept going, trying not to let it get to me or slow me down. Over my years in ministry I have slowly learned more of being present to pain and struggles. It has been in these past seven years that the loss after loss and the pain of that has caused me to learn to sit with the suffering and find God’s guidance, support, even healing through the process.

Today, as we are finding our way through this Lent season leading up to Easter, I pray you may find some encouragement and hope of how God can save us through suffering. Okagesama De

About a year and half after Bev passed, I went on a journey Bev had arranged and hoped we could share together. It was a trip to France that ended in Spain. It is called the Camino De Santiago. This is a pilgrim walk that has existed since the 9th century. Millions have walked the pilgrimage to be closer to God, themselves and sort their way of the meaning of life. Bev signed us up as her health declined for us to go on a part bus journey and part walk along the route. It was a time for me to process Bev’s passing and seek God’s guidance, comfort and peace. On one of the days we walked all day in the country side of France, I lingered behind our group of 20 people to have time alone. That morning I had reflected on the Matt. 16 passage we are looking at today. As I walked, I felt the agony of regret come over me, I felt my own cross of despair over my life, wishing I had done better with Bev, our sons and family, in ministry and life. My mistakes, flaws and shortcomings weighed on me as a heavy cross I felt I was to bear. Walking alone, my head bent to the ground in front of me, my groans of

confession and guilt poured out. I felt lost in my brokenness. Then I heard a whisper come to me, I sensed it was God saying, “Look up to My Son’s Cross, your hope is in Him and His cross is your release of forgiveness and new life in My love. Look up.” At that moment I looked up to the sky and there over me was a cross formed by clouds lingering overhead. I knew then that Christ’s suffering saved me. It is God’s gift. Okagesama De - “Because of You”

“21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life(soul) will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what they have done.²⁸ “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” Matthew 16:21-28

Suffering Can Save Me From...

I. The certainty of my own way of thinking. “Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, “Never Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Matt. 16:22-23

When Jesus told of His purpose of suffering many things and even death in order for Him to rise, Peter rebuked Jesus in his own way to prevent Jesus’ suffering. Peter meant well, he had compassion, but it was not thinking of Jesus’ way and purpose, it was his own. Peter had certainty of how to fix the situation his own way. Jesus didn’t ask Peter to do this. In fact left to Peter, Jesus’ main purpose would have been prevented. What would have served Peter and Jesus better, would be Peter asking Jesus, what are you asking me to see and do with you instead of just for you. It sounds harsh what Jesus said to Peter, it was because Jesus knew Peter and what it would take to reach him, to let Jesus suffer to heal us.

When we are certain of what is best, of what we think God should do and how God should be, we are preventing God from doing the good Christ came to do and wants to do in our lives today.

A. How am I suffering for being certain and demanding my own way with others, myself, the world we live in, and even of God.

II. The pursuit of trying to create my own worth and value “For whoever wants to save their life(soul) will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Matt.16:25-26.

When I was out swimming two years ago, and couldn't breathe on my way to flat island in Kailua Bay, I was still feeling the numbness of grieving Bev's absence along with the rest of my family who had passed. I was nearly a 1/4 mile from shore and couldn't breathe. Andrew, my son swimming near by came close and we felt better to try to reach the island, since it was closer. As I was struggling to get enough air amidst the waves and wind and find failing strength to get to the island, I was calm in my mind and heart. I had felt for the past year and half that not much mattered to me, I didn't really think I mattered much, I was just empty. Out there in the ocean, maybe 25 feet away, I could barely breathe, and I simply prayed, “God in my weakness, bring your strength, I'm not sure I will make it.”, with a sense of relief to go.

Then I heard a whisper of God's voice say to me, “I know you are not afraid to die, but are you afraid to live?” This hit me so powerfully in that moment and since. I felt God's love for me. My value and worth comes from Christ. I am here by God's Grace and love for this day, day by day. Learn to live again. Suffering brought me to hear God and His will to save me, not just from dying in the ocean, but from dying in my soul of thinking I don't matter. I realized in a new and deeper way, I matter to God. Okagesama de, because of You, Christ, I choose to live with You and for You.

B. What searching drives me to distracted busyness, anxious worries, reactivity to other words or treatment?

Suffering Can Save Me From...

III. Missing my surrender to God's care and new life. “For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what they have done.” Matt.16:27

What is it God looks for us to do in this life? Surrender to God, have a heart to live by Okagesama de, because of Christ and what Christ wants us to do, His way.

Oskar Schindler was a German industrialist, member of the Nazi Party and at the beginning of Hitler's rise amidst the war, he pursued making a lot of money manufacturing ammunitions and other products needed by the Nazi army. In time the horrific atrocities to the Jews got to him, their suffering changed him, and he used his resources of his factories and money to bribe Nazi officials so he could get more and more Jews to work for him and in order to avoid the exterminations in the concentration camps.

I'd like to share a short video from the true life story of Oskar Schindler found in the movie "Schindler's List." I have found this to be such a moving portrayal of the weight of regret that brings such suffering and how God brings such saving grace through many people and ways to reveal His Care and New life.

C. What barriers or blocks have I held to that keeps me from receiving and responding to God's full goodness?

Closing: May we each find fresh hope in the midst of our suffering because of Christ's love for us through his suffering in order to heal us with His care and new life. Okagesama de, Because of You, Christ we are saved. Amen