

It is said that patience is a virtue, but how far should you take that. You've probably heard the old story of the teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put his boots on? He asked for help and she could see why. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots still didn't want to go on. By the time she got the second boot on, she had worked up a sweat.

She almost whimpered when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked and sure enough, they were. It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as they worked together to get the boots back on -- this time on the right feet.

He then announced, "These aren't my boots." She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?" like she wanted to. Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off.

He then said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them." She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace to wrestle the boots on his feet again.

She said, "Now, where are your mittens?" He said, "I stuffed them in the toes of my boots ..."

We can roll our eyes at a situation like this and we can praise someone who can be so patient. Maybe we have similar patience. Maybe we don't. But when it comes to suffering patience can be a very troubling thing.

If you are recovering from an injury or maybe surgery and the pain is all consuming patience is tough to come by. Someone in an abusive relationship may live every day with a nagging worry about when the next abuse will come. If Jesus says we can depend on him and he will give us the strength and support we need, and even give us a life of joy and wholeness, then why the waiting. Pain is real. Lives are broken. People are hurting, and our Lord can seem all too silent for far too long.

We could wish we were in our gospel reading where Jesus seems to be healing people all over the place. We pick up in Mark's gospel where we left off last week. I didn't preach about it, but you may remember Jesus was in Capernaum on the Sabbath and a demon possessed man came in. Jesus cast out the demon and restored the man.

Today we pick up with more healing miracles. We're at Simon Peter's house and his mother-in-law is sick. If Peter had

a mother-in-law that's proof that at least one of the popes of the Catholic church was married - a precedent they don't seem interesting in restoring any time soon. Anyway, she's sick and in bed. Jesus takes her by the hand and he heals her. She then immediately begins to serve Jesus and the others.

You'll remember that in the sarcastic part of my brain I always imagine Jesus coming home from worship and it's lunch time. He wants a sandwich. But Peter's mother-in-law is sick and Jesus doesn't feel like making a sandwich for himself, so he heals her and then she makes him a sandwich; as if it was easier for Jesus to heal her than to make himself something to eat.

It may seem like a silly detail to include that she immediately began to serve them, but this is not a subtle text to keep women at home doing housework. For a woman at that time the ability to be hospitable and serve her guests was a source of dignity and pride. Being unable to do that made her feel broken and a failure. Jesus doesn't heal her because he wants lunch. Jesus heals her so that she can feel whole and go about the things that gave her a sense of self-worth; in her case being a hostess to her honored guests.

After this scene they bring many people to the house for Jesus to heal, and he does so. Now Jesus gets up early the next

morning and goes off to pray, but after that it's right back traveling from town to town healing people left and right. Oh, to be around him in that time - to have Jesus right there in the flesh and to have him giving miraculous solutions to the pain-filled problems in people's lives. I think we all have a thought passing through our heads longing for such solutions to our lives' problems. But it isn't that way.

Pain is real and can appear to last indefinitely; undeniably true for the terminally ill.

Now our first reading from Isaiah calls us to be patient. We are to wait for God to act and be patient - even if it takes a long time. God will not forget us no matter how delayed his presence appears to be. However,... easier said than done.

Some people come up with the idea that we have to be patient through suffering because God is trying to teach us something - or that God is toughening us for some greater task.

Indeed, God can do anything; so I won't rule out such things as impossibilities, but let's not get too wrapped up in them either. Some people suffer horribly for a long long time and for no reason we'll ever know. Do we really think God is such a horrible teacher and taskmaster? Does God really have to teach us and prepare us that way? And if God is toughening us

through suffering, then doesn't that mean that God has only more pain and suffering for us to bear in the future?

No, all these lines of thought take us nowhere at best. They make us hate and distrust God at worst.

I'm currently reading the book *Hinds Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard. It's an allegory about a woman named Much-Afraid who lives in fear, but longs to be with Jesus on the High Places. She wants to be filled with love and joy and asks Jesus to take her to the high places. He agrees, but warns her that the way is treacherous and winding. Indeed she finds many obstacles, pains, setbacks and temptations. Sometimes she is traveling on long asides for she does not know how long. The only thing she does know is that she is promised that she will get there in the end. While Jesus always shows up when he is needed he is not as present as she wishes.

I haven't finished the book so I can't give it a full critique. I will say that I don't like that the book suggests everything has a purpose. As I said before, I don't like that attitude. Plus it isn't entirely biblical. Sometimes God gets mad when people have to suffer unnecessarily. Not every trial and tribulation is guaranteed to have a God-ordained purpose.

But I do like that the book suggests the journey is long and full of confusion, and sometimes you feel abandoned and afraid.

Ultimately all of the experiences, good and bad, seem to be refining Much-Afraid's heart into one that is deeply loving. That love grows stronger and more powerful at every step. And without the struggles the love would never mature.

I won't fully speculate as to how God works, but it does often appear that when our hearts are turned the right way, every experience can help us to grow - and without some hardship growth never comes.

May you always be able to feel Christ's presence not far away. And even if you don't may you never feel totally abandoned. While we wish Christ would take away all our pain, that does not seem to be God's will. So, like generations before us we trust in God's promises, never having the full surety we think we need. And may love grow to give nourishment and joy to you through whatever circumstances may come. Amen