

2 Timothy 1: 1-14
Creekside COB
October 7, 2007

“The Community of Brokenness”

Denny was a good man. We met in high school, and along with many classmates, I counted him as a friend. Denny was popular, outgoing, smart and funny. The fact that he was good-looking didn't hurt him, either. He was prematurely gray, which added a distinguished air to his presence, and his girlfriend, who would eventually become his wife, wasn't hard on the eye, either! Granted, our eighteen-year-old perspective on life was limited, but the way we saw it, Denny had it made.

My appreciation of Denny grew over the next four years as we worked together during my summer breaks from college. The years went by, and we lost track of each other. Then I got a call from a mutual friend. “Have you heard about Denny?” He has ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease. On my way to Ohio to visit him, I asked the question that lots of us asked—*“Of all people, why Denny? He has a family and a business. He's only thirty-four. Why now?”*

I called before going to his home. An old man answered the phone. “May I speak to Denny?” I asked. “This is Denny,” was the reply. His speech was labored. The words slurred. When I arrived I walked into the living room where he was waiting for me in a wheel chair. He bore little resemblance to the Denny I remembered. His hair was totally gray, his cheeks were sunken, his body was frail. He wore braces on both hands to keep his fingers from curling in. Conversation was growing more difficult.

It didn't take Denny long to get down to business. *“I want you to do my funeral,”* he said. I swallowed hard and replied, *“You're not asking for much, are you?”* I told him it would be hard to do, but that I was honored to honor his request. I asked about his concerns. *“It's not death. I'm afraid of losing my ability to*

communicate.” When he could no longer form words he relied on a computer with special speech software that helped him form phrases by moving his forehead muscles. It wasn’t long, however, until he lost this ability. During the weeks before his death, he could only respond by blinking once for “no” and twice for “yes.”

What Denny feared most was suffering alone. “I’m afraid my friends will stop coming.” Sadly, his fear was well founded. As the ALS progressed and Denny’s condition deteriorated, visits became less frequent and during his last days no one came to be with him. “I couldn’t stand seeing him like that,” they said. “It wasn’t the way I wanted to remember him. I didn’t want my reaction to upset him.”

Denny got a little taste of Jesus’ passion when his friends deserted him in his hour of need. Denny’s friends were wrapped in their concerns and fears. They forgot that it was about Denny, not them. After courses of conventional and experimental therapy-- less than two years after the diagnosis, Denny died, but not before meeting the Lord of all compassion whose passion helped him bear our own.

I can see the faces of my peers packed into the church for the funeral. They seemed to reflect the words of a song we all knew by heart—“Something’s happening here. What it is, ain’t exactly clear.” For some, it was the first time they knew someone their own age who suffered and died, and they declined the opportunity to suffer with him. I know it sounds weird to put opportunity and suffering together. We maximize opportunities and avoid adversity and suffering, but what Jesus said and his apostles spread sounded weird, too.

In the opening verses of 2 Timothy 1 is a case in point—an invitation from Paul to share in suffering. Nothing is said about avoiding it. He seems to say, “Put a heaping helping on your plate. There’s plenty to go around. As long as we are going to suffer in this world, we may as well do it *together*.”

This isn't the same thing as, "Misery loves company." Over the years I have shared an insight from Henri Nouwen with people in the grip of brokenness. He said, "*We can endure anything—as long as we know someone is waiting with us and for us.*" Think back to a time when you were at the end of your rope. Did you get through it alone? Maybe you lost a job. Maybe you lost your way. Maybe you lost your faith, your health, or your spouse by death or the living death of divorce. For whatever reason, life dropped you to your knees, and while you were fretting and sweating over what to do, you looked up and there they were, the imperfect ones-- the clay-footed people who worship along side you on Sunday. Despite all of its faults (and despite yours), the church stuck with you. I'm sorry it wasn't something Denny knew because the church wasn't part of his life.

I spoke with someone who described the traumatic loss of three members of her immediate family. As I listened to her tell the story, a knot grew in my stomach as I tried to imagine what it was like to endure such loss. She concluded each episode by saying, "God, I don't know how I made it through those awful times, but I did." She answered her own question with an unconscious evoking of God's name, and all the things her church did to get her through it.

As Christians we live under an authority that compels us to weep with those who weep—to help shoulder the burdens and share the sufferings of life. It's the reason we pray for the needs shared each Sunday. Yet, important as it is to pray for our needs, it is NOT the kind of suffering that concerned neither Jesus nor Paul in 2nd Timothy.

Denny got ALS. Why? Jan got pancreatic cancer. Why? Ralph fell down the basement steps and died from brain trauma. Why? Claudette was in a car wreck and has barely been able to walk since then. WHY? Garnett suffers with rheumatoid arthritis. Why? Some of you have stiff joints, or are losing your eyesight and hearing. Some are depressed. Some grieve. Some think that if it weren't for bad luck they'd have no luck at all. And my neck hurts most of the time. WILL SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME, WHY?

Before I tell you, I'll tell you WHY NOT. It has nothing to do with being singled out. It's not because God wills it or wants it. It is not because you've been naughty boys and girls and God is teaching you a lesson, or because your faith is weak, or you have been selected to suffer as a witness or inspiration to others. It has nothing to do with fairness or justice. Its because you are HUMAN!

Knowing this doesn't lessen the pain, nor does it lessen the need for prayer and the support of fellow Christians. But this isn't the suffering that concerns Paul. He said, "Share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God." What concerns Paul is the brokenness and suffering we experience because of the way we have chosen to believe and live.

Jesus did not suffer because God wanted him to suffer. He didn't suffer because his beliefs were odd. It wasn't because he picked fights with the authorities. It was because he believed the world was God's, and he bowed to no authority except God. Jesus suffered because the way he lived his message and told others to live it was a threat to those who thought *they* were in charge. The people who chose Jesus' way faced hardship and persecution, not because they sought it. The way they lived went against the grain of what was considered normal.

I'm afraid we don't know much about suffering for the Gospel. When we stand up during sharing time we generally ask prayers for people who are sick. Someone is having surgery. Someone is hurting. Someone broke a leg. Someone is touched by misfortune. We get preoccupied with such concerns. They aren't small potatoes, but what concerns Jesus and Paul goes beyond this.

Years ago someone wrote a book called, *The Comfortable Pew*. The author said we take the radical message of Jesus and turn it into something tame, controllable, comfortable and suited to our needs. There isn't much suffering going on for the Gospel in the church—some minor inconvenience, maybe, but not suffering. I haven't heard anyone ask for prayer because they've taken a

stand against the ethics of an employer. No one says, “Please pray for me. I’ve lost my friends and my livelihood because I did what was right.”

Last year we were horrified by the news that a gunman killed Amish children in their school. The media flocked to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to cover the tragic story and report on the response of the Amish community. They knew they were under the authority of a demanding and forgiving God who called them to forgive their children’s killer. The Amish live surrounded by a culture that only knows how to respond with retaliation, people were shaking their heads in disbelief, while the Amish prayed in their brokenness to be able to suffer for the Gospel.

Will Willimon suggests that pastors give altar calls like this: “If there are any of you who are visiting today and you like what you have heard, I invite you to join this church, join our fellowship of suffering! We are going to make you more miserable than you have ever been in your life! Come, accept Jesus as your personal savior, and expose yourself to a great deal of pain that you might not have had, had you not been trying to follow Jesus! Please come down to the front as the organist softly plays our last hymn.”

We have learned the power that comes in suffering when we rely on Christians who rally around us and stick with us. We have much more to learn when it comes to suffering for the sake of the Gospel, and relying upon each other and God to see us through.