

Survivor Seminar Series Presentation on Suffering
Fr. Denis Donahue, presenter
December 2, 2023

Fr. Donahue is a priest of the Diocese of Arlington for over 30 years, and presently pastor of St. Philip Parish in Falls Church, VA. Forty-six years ago, when 14 years old, Fr. Donahue was shot twice with a deer rifle by a sniper while delivering newspapers in his hometown, Ann Arbor, MI. Since then, Fr. Donahue has suffered much, physically, and emotionally, because of this injury, and in his life as a parish priest. At our December gathering, Fr. Donahue shared about some of the people and things God has put into his life that have helped him not only endure sufferings, but also turn those great moments of pain into times of growth and greater closeness to God. Fr. Donahue spoke of things that are near at hand and readily available, the Scriptures, the Sacraments, the Saints, and God's creation, especially other people.

The following pages are from a handout given to participants, including notes on topics covered by the presentation.

Ecclesiastes, 3:1-11

“There is an appointed time for everything,
and a time for every affair under the heavens.

A time to give birth, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.

A time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to tear down, and a time to build.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

A time to scatter stones, and a time to gather them;
a time to embrace, and a time to be far from embraces.

A time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away.

A time to rend, and a time to sew;
a time to be silent, and a time to speak.

A time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.

What profit have workers from their toil?

I have seen the business that God has given to mortals to be busied about.

God has made everything appropriate to its time, but has put the timeless into their hearts so they cannot find out, from beginning to end, the work which God has done.”

Reflection:

Mourning is the natural response to any loss, including those that occur when one is abused. We naturally want to reject or resolve our suffering, but God says there is a time to mourn, there is a necessity in our humanity to grieve, whether this is the loss of a person or relationship, or an experience of a loss of some aspect of our self. How does one move forward? God's word encourages us to trust that progress is inevitable, amidst periodic waves of pain, He is there to support. Many experience in their process the "time to be silent," when there is not safety or readiness to share – this is normal and acceptable, for some of those with whom you might share may not understand or respond in a helpful manner. Yet it is important to be open to the "time to speak," when you can share your experience and experience the understanding, belonging, and acceptance that you deserve as a child of God and member of the Body of Christ.

Reading: **Gen 3:1-19**

Reflection: We all suffer from the original sin of Adam and Eve, which introduced disorder and suffering into the world which continues to have consequences. So too, we suffer from what others have done to us. This reading also reminds us that we too can do things that bring suffering upon ourselves and others, if only unintentionally. While we cannot take away pain others have caused us, we can manage the suffering in a way that helps us live with it. Denying the pain is not the answer, so we need to examine our pain under the protective mantle of God's word. First by "asking so we might receive" grace and healing, but also through being with and offering our support to others, when the time is right.

"I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
They will strike at your head,
while you strike at their heel." Gen 3:15

In verse 15, the woman represents Mary, the serpent represents Satan, and the offspring represents Jesus. Jesus and Mary crush the head- crush Satan, who still hassles us. While Satan and evil are present in daily life, verse 15 is a reminder that even amidst this disorder, God always thinks of us and our salvation.

Reading: **Sirach 2:1-10**

Reflection: This letter from a father to a son is meant to speak to all of us as God's steadfast concern for us: we will not be forgotten, and will not be overlooked in our mourning, and so can trust in God, Our Father's, constant care. Yet we must acknowledge, be patient with ourselves, and accept in ourselves a natural need to seek control and protect ourselves, which can make trusting so very difficult.

For those who may not have grown up with a caring, loving father, this passage may be difficult to process. It may be helpful to bring to mind another person in your life who may have had these qualities, or perhaps bring to mind some historical figures such as St. Joseph, or other admirable real or fictional characters.

While trust is difficult, still, a helpful habit to cultivate might be selecting a few verses from the Psalms that speak to you; consider, for example, memorizing and repeating to yourself passages such as:

Psalm 16:1 “Keep me safe O Lord, you are my hope.”

Psalm 55:23 “Cast all your cares upon the LORD, he will give you support. He will never allow the righteous to stumble.”

Reading: ***Mt 11:28-30***

Reflection:

Recognize that you are indeed “heavy laden,” through the actions of another and through no fault of your own and strive to accept the Lord’s invitation to come to Him and trust that He will ease your burden. Jesus promises this to us, and His will, will be done.

Reading: ***Lk 12:32-34***

Reflection:

This passage occurs after the Sermon on the Mount. Fear not, persevere in God’s will for your life We will have treasure in heaven that will deliver us from the ills of the world.

Reading: ***Mt 27:45-47, 50***

Reflection:

While in despair on the Cross, Jesus went to the depths to experience pain like ours, and experienced the feeling of abandonment: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” ... yet a full reading of Psalm 22 (Jesus is referencing this psalm) reveals that the immediate pain is not the end, but that we are not far off from God’s peace, He has heard us in our affliction, and we will be satisfied, delivered from our pain.

In conclusion, when suffering or when struggling to trust or forgive, consider the following:

- Read Scripture
- Reflect on the saints, particularly those who suffered: St. John Paul II, St. Padre Pio, etc.
- Approach the Sacraments as you are able: Adoration, Communion, Reconciliation
- Turn to others who understand, trusted family and friends
- Observe in nature, things that are quiet and mysterious, that reflect the beauty of God, listen to soothing music, e.g., Beethoven's sonatas
- Book Recommendation: *Spiritual Friendship* by Saint Aelred (of Rievaulx)