



SOUTHSIDE MIDWEEK NEWSLETTER 6.24.20

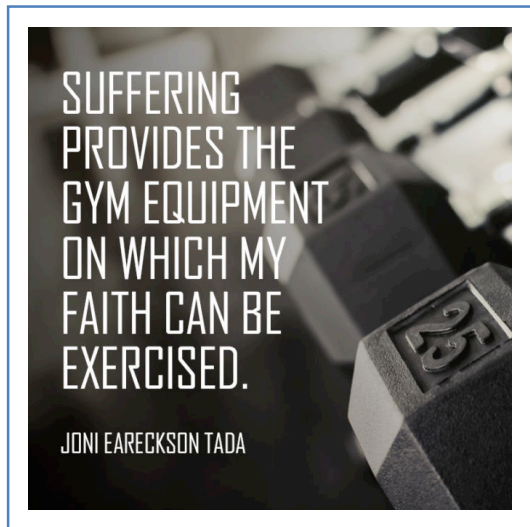
Joni Eareckson Tada – Barrett

I had thought very little about the important connection between faith and suffering prior to meeting Joni Eareckson Tada. In July 2013, Karen and I attended a conference in Louisville, KY and heard her speak about heaven. It was the best sermon I have ever heard about heaven. We also attended a class she taught and stayed afterward in order to speak with her for a minute. Since then, she has continued to teach Karen and me through her life and ministry about this important connection.

In case you have never heard of her, let me begin by telling you a little bit about her story. Joni was born in 1949 in Baltimore, Maryland. She was very athletic growing up, participating on both the tennis and swimming teams at her high school. On July 30, 1967 (at the age of 17), she misjudged the depth of the water and dove into a shallow portion of the Chesapeake Bay. She suffered a fracture in her spine and became a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the shoulders down. She has remained in this physical condition for the last 53 years.

In our text from this past Sunday, Peter talks about the important connection between faith and suffering. When most people are presented with the possibility of suffering, they will either choose to avoid it at all costs or endure it only if they have to. However, in verses 6&7 of chapter one, Peter shares that Christians can do more than just avoid or endure suffering. In fact, he gives three reasons as to why it is possible for a Christian to actually embrace suffering. First, we can embrace it because of its length. Our suffering is relatively short in comparison with our lasting inheritance. Second, we can embrace it because of its purpose. When we suffer, our faith, which is of greater worth than gold, is refined. Third, we can embrace it because of its result. Our suffering will result in praise, honor, and glory when Jesus Christ is revealed.

I think these three reasons are very helpful as we think about the possibility of suffering. And it is Peter's second reason concerning the purpose of suffering that Joni has helped me to understand more clearly. According to Peter, faith gives suffering a purpose. To suffer without a purpose is unbearable; but when we know there is a purpose, our suffering can be embraced. Peter says all suffering can be thought of as a refiners fire to prove our faith genuine. In Joni's sermon about heaven she made a statement that I have often thought about during the last couple of years. She said, "God is more interested in our inward qualities than our outward circumstances. The Father cares about my outward circumstances, but more importantly about things like refining my faith, humbling my heart, cleaning up my thought life, and strengthening my character." The years of suffering in her outward circumstances have given her an invaluable perspective about the importance God places on her inner qualities. I appreciate her spiritual insight into the connection between faith and suffering. May her life and words encourage you as well as you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.



Courage – Kevin

“The history of God’s people is not a record of God searching for courageous men and women who could handle the task, but God transforming the hearts of cowards” (Erwin McManus). Last week I wrote about the endangered quality of commitment. Today the endangered quality is courage.

Take a look at a couple of lines in Psalm 78. This psalm is a meditation (maskil) focused on Israel’s history with God. The opening words tell us to “listen – hear my message”. If you read very far, you’ll see this is a memory of some unhappy days in Israel’s history. The psalmist contrasts God’s faithfulness and patience with Israel’s failure and unbelief. The psalm would have been sung in a minor key. Psalm 78:9-10 reads like this: “The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows turned back on the day of battle; they did not keep God’s covenant and refused to live by his law.” These warriors were trained marksmen. They had the best weapons to handle any attack, but you’d never know it. Why? They ran. Their battle cry was “Retreat!” On the surface they would have stolen the show at parades with their precision. When the battle started, they ran. They were the original quitters. Cowards.

How would you describe a coward? Someone who runs from a fight? Someone who’s afraid of being hurt? Someone who takes the easy way out or always chooses the quick fix? Someone who quits when life gets tough? In Matthew 4:18-20 we read about Peter and Andrew choosing to follow Jesus. What if these two men chose not to drop their nets? What if they tried to bring their nets along with them? What did those nets represent? Maybe their income, their security, even their identity? Jesus was asking them to give all that up, to walk away from all of it. To do what they did required an abundance of courage. Dragging your nets around while you’re trying to follow Jesus is highly challenging. We seem to get tangled up in our nets quite often: guilt, anger, insecurity, addictions, excuses, lying, arrogance. How many times have we mistreated someone so another person would think a certain way about us? That’s the choice a coward makes. How many times have we laughed at stuff that’s inappropriate because everyone else is laughing? That’s the choice a coward makes. Loving people others laugh at and push aside takes courage. Serving people others avoid takes courage. Standing up for those who are being mistreated by the crowd or even by a single loud-mouth takes courage. Any coward can go with the flow. Following Jesus takes courage.

At a time in history when Dr. Martin Luther King began to receive threatening phone calls and letters, fear began to paralyze him. One night he had a defining moment. In his words, “It seemed as though I heard an inner voice saying, ‘Stand up for righteousness; stand for truth. God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me an inner calm. My experience with God had given me new strength and trust. I know now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms of life.” Focus on that last line. Dr. King is talking about courage. Our experiences with God hold the potential to provide us the inner resources for courage in whatever situation we may face. Lean into this divine potential and watch how courage is no longer an endangered quality in your life.

A Shepherd’s Prayer – Mike

Keeping our eyes on Jesus is always challenging, but seems more so these days. All the more reason to spend time with God, be in His word, converse with Him in prayer, and seek out ways and opportunities to be with and encourage His people. Not to mention being a lamp in the darkness sharing our Hope with a visibly struggling world. Let’s face it, we need Jesus and so does everyone around us. This is the core of our mission statement: Because of Jesus, we seek the lost, embrace the hurting, equip the saved, and celebrate God’s grace.

Online and some in-person services, Zoom meetings for life groups, personal study and prayer time, small gatherings for dinner and conversation are all ways to have community and connect with God and our Southside family. There are other ways as well. I’d like to share briefly about one in which I participate. One of the highpoints of my week is a Monday night Bible study. We are currently meeting via Zoom but look forward to being back together around a dining room table. Fortunately, it is not a group of men that all look and sound alike. There is more than a 30-year age spread in the ten or so members and we come from diverse backgrounds. We enjoy each other’s company, and we truly enjoy delving into the word of God together. We ask probing questions, we joke around a bit, but more than anything, we work together to better understand God’s word. It is a group of men who love the Lord and one another. Hunter would love it, because we often greet with a “man hug” . . . he loves those.

My intent is to encourage you. I pray you have a small group of people you can invest in, be a part of, and encourage in the Lord. If you have a group like this - great, consider adding one more chair and offering the open chair to someone who could use the encouragement. If you don’t have such a group, I urge you to reach out to a group you know of or reach out to the leadership at Southside and allow us to help you find a group. Satan is working hard all the time to find ways to separate and divide God’s people, but God designed us for community. Let’s all do our best to maintain and grow the fellowship of God.

Father in heaven we come to you and acknowledge your sovereignty and holiness. We confess our weakness and our sin. We ask you Father to be merciful and show us your grace. We do not deserve it and we know we cannot repay you. Father, we also confess our love for you and your people. We pray for healing for those who are physically sick. We pray also for healing of relationships, communities, cities and our country. Where Satan seeks to separate, deceive and destroy – we pray that you might use us to help unite, speak truth, and help heal relationships through your love. Help us to be prepared by spending time in your word, in prayer, and in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Lead us Father with your Spirit. Bring change in our hearts and draw us closer to you. Use us in your kingdom. In Christ’s name we come to you, Amen.