

Table of Grace

Week 2 Table Talk

Pastor Ashley Alley Crawford

Well. Good morning. I am Ashley Alley Crawford. And, typically, you all don't see me. I saw Brian Thomas out there. He's like, Ashley, you're here. You're preaching, right? Yeah. That's why I'm in the first service. If I, if I'm typically, in the second service about right over here. And, but I'm really glad to be preaching here, this morning and grateful for Mandy's invitation, to to preach during the table, the table talk series here.

If you don't know me, my day job is to to. I am a pastor, but I don't, work in the local church. I get to participate in this in this wonderful church, and I'm so grateful for that. But I work on the conference staff for the Great Plains Conference. I get to work with a lot of clergy and kind of some discernment about and.

But the very best part of my job, is to create opportunities and, and help, individual people who are trying to lean into what deeper discipleship looks like. And so, I'm really glad I get to do that today as, as a guest preacher here, though I, I have to give you fair warning. I guess in the spirit of table talk, be prepared.

You may feel a little indigestion at some point in the midst of the sermon, so hang tight. Ultimately, there's good news. I do tend to be a fairly optimistic person. I don't know if you've ever seen those. I don't have a picture of it. Sorry. Just Google it. You can find it. But those optical illusions of the, like, you know, the old woman and the, the young, beautiful girl.

Those where depending on how you look at the picture, is what you're going to see in there. And I just would have to say that typically my perspective on life is the young, optimistic, though one can make an argument for why an old woman is an optimistic, posture in life. I just thought of that. So never mind.

That was raised. But I do tend to kind of see the positive things. In life. And, somehow in the last year, the last couple of years, I think I have been, feeling, maybe some or a brush with some reality, coming into terms that despite all that is good and beautiful and right and wonderful, and young and vibrant, but despite all of those things, and despite the fact that Christ's final victory, is is true and all shall be well, I have started to wonder if the baseline for human experience is actually struggle and frustration fatigue.

Man, am I just not an entire ball of unicorns in sorry, rainbows, all those things. Sorry. I do tend to stay pretty positive, but I think what has been happening for me in the last few years

is that I have been starting to see things, not through quite the rose colored glasses that I, feel like I was born with.

Now, some of you may say,

I'm at the opposite. I always see the struggle and the frustration. It's hard for me to see, the rainbows in the unicorn. So we need us all. So both of you hang tight here. But I can remember, it's been a few years ago now, probably 15 or 20.

And I remember talking to, a mentor of mine, and I was she was talking to me about. We were kind of talking about a struggle I was facing, and she was like. And I said, I just things are really busy right now. I just need things to slow down when things settle down, then I'm going to, like, really focus on that challenge.

And the look on her face was like, okay, sure, things are going to slow down. Sure. I think she knew what I may be coming to terms with. In the last few years that things probably won't settle down. Things probably won't slow down. Even if even if the hurdle that I'm facing right now kind of, you know, stabilizes, in all likelihood, something else will emerge.

We can't always get what we want. Or maybe. And in the words of the late 1900s poet, every rose has its thorn. So if we're not careful, we can get caught in the daily grind and frustration of things that we don't have control over, and we can end up spending our one wild and precious life focused on the bad, focused, angry, worried, scared, and just plain tired.

Well, I, I kind of think about staying angry, scared, worried tired. I think that describe what the disciples were facing that night on the, the the table, the table of grace that we're going to be talking about the, the Last Supper. We're still here in the shadow of Easter. And I want us to think about what those decide the earliest disciples of Jesus might have been experiencing.

It was the Last Supper. It was it was not just the Last Supper because, it ended up being Jesus's kind of last meal. And that's what we call it. But it was it wasn't just a meal he was gathering for. It was the Passover meal, the the traditional, the annual celebration of the deliverance of the Jews from captivity.

It's it's it's told in, the book of Exodus. We get to read it. And it was a practice of all the faithful, Israelites, the Jewish people, as they remembered the way that God had removed them from slavery. So, Israel, you you may or may not know, here's a fun fact for you, Israel, that the name Israel, we know it as a country, that it was actually a name given to Jacob.

And it was it was the the name actually means he struggles with God. So so Jacob had, a struggle. He he wrestled with an angel and after, the wrestling match, then he asked God to

ask the angel to bless him and and the and he was blessed with a new name. And it was he struggles with God.

Struggle is a part of our history. It's a part of the our story. It's the name of a nation. He struggles with God and the, the struggles that those disciples were experiencing that day. At the Last Supper. They were people of the struggle. They were longing and waiting for the Messiah, the Anointed One, to come and to rescue them.

Now they were no longer in captivity. They, had actually been in captivity once again after that. That history that of the exodus there. And, and the rulers of the day were the Romans, and the Israelites that the Jewish people could worship God, which was good. But they still had to play by the Roman rules.

And they were waiting for the Messiah to come and to rescue them from their struggle. It was all kind of coming to a crescendo during this week. Jesus had come in on the donkey as had been prophesied. People had as saying Hallelujah to him. And then, he began to become an open target of those religious leaders.

So who were these disciples, these people who were hunkered down with Jesus, having this, celebrating this meal of deliverance, but potentially feeling a little scared and angry and concerned about, the growing, tempest around them with Jesus. Well, they weren't exactly polished powerbrokers. They were a couple of fishermen in the bunch. There was a tax collector, which actually kind of had a bad reputation.

They were sort of known for skimming off the top. There they were a little bit suspect in that regard. Other people, we don't know their jobs, but we know that they were devoted followers. There was a zealot, there was a Pharisee. And they were they were a longing and waiting for this Messiah to come. So, but they knew, Jesus, who was this Rabbi Peter had even named him as that Messiah, the one who would free them from oppression and set them free.

And yet, they are gathered at this meal, and I can only imagine that they are wondering what is what's going on here? Someone must have been thinking. Did we get it wrong? Is this struggle ever going to be over? Well, I want you to hear these words from Luke chapter 22. They're eating their meal, and at the end of the meal, this happens when the hour came.

Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, I've eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I will not eat until it again, and eat it again, until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God. After taking the cup, he gave thanks, and he said, take this and divided among you, for I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.

And then he took bread, and he gave thanks, and he broke it, and he gave it to them, saying, this is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way after that, the, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, this cup of the new covenant is in my is my blood, which is poured out for you.

But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of God will go as it has been decreed. But woe to the man who betrays them. Well, they begin to question among themselves which of them it might be. Who would do this? A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.

Jesus said to them, the king, the kings of the Gentiles lorded over them, and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves for who is greater, the one who is at the table, or the one who serves is it not the one who is at the table?

But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials, and I confer on you a kingdom, just as my father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Well, if if you've ever seen any of the kind of the the movies set that depict this scene at all, you know, the camera zooms in, you start to look across all the faces.

They look confused. They look scared. Jesus has just called out that one person is going to betray them. No sooner does that happen than all of a sudden a couple of them say, well, I'm not a betrayer. In fact, I think I'm the greatest. No, I'm the greatest. A competition breaks out and not enough of dissension among the ranks that the story gets told here in the Gospels.

And Jesus goes on to, to to say to them, and, and sets this tone for them that the kingdom that he is talking about is one, to sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Well, this is a normal, this is kind of a normal rhythm, of of the their dinner together. And yet, Jesus changes up the script.

There's four cups of salvation. I'm sorry, four cups of of wine that have different meanings in the midst of this meal. Deliverance and sanctification and redemption and celebration of the future. And Jesus now says, this is a cup of salvation. Now I have a feeling that the salvation that they thought at this time is that they were going to somehow be saved in their present moment.

That would be a great salvation. Any of us who are feeling, under struggle and under, in distress, we want saved from our situation right then and there. And I think that's what

some of them thought was going to happen. And then Jesus goes on to talk about brokenness, a broken bread, his body. No, wait a minute.

Now, he had prophesied this before. He had said that he would he would die. But I have a feeling that they, didn't quite know what that had to mean. So, so that is exactly what happened that Jesus did give his life. He he did. His body was broken. His blood was poured out. He got to experience a resurrection.

And I think it the, the power of the resurrection is that they began to see that even when things look darkest, even when things look,

like despair is going to to rule the day that salvation may look different, they may not actually be rescued from their circumstances. They may actually be rescued for salvation that starts here, that that culminates, in the time to come.

This is a different kind of messiah, perhaps, than they were expecting, and maybe even sometimes a different kind of messiah than we want. We want Jesus to rescue us from our struggle. We want an excused absence from the challenges of life. And yet, let's look back at what this Messiah, this Jesus has done over the time since then.

Well, the people of God have in some cases not been free to worship freely. And yet Jesus has been in the people who loved their neighbors and who cared for the poor, and who obeyed his commandments and did not bow down to evil. Jesus has been in new life that testifies to joy amid all that looks dark.

Jesus has been to the in the commitment for suffering, to not get the last word for death to not have the sting. Jesus has not just been in the people. Jesus's in the church. This is the church has been a place of solace. It's been a place of protection. It's been a place of care for all, for all people.

It's been a place of learning, protection of information and books and libraries over, over the last 2000 years, many of the best libraries have been, preserved in monasteries and in places of the church. But the church itself are the people who proclaim and trust in the truth of Jesus Christ, that he is indeed the Messiah, that he did come to save us, not to save us from our sins and to save us for righteousness.

The world is going to have turmoil around us. And Jesus again shows us the example of what it looks like, to, to be faithful in the midst of it. So I believe Jesus really is the hope of and for the world. And I think it's really important for us to be honest that that all things do not look rosy, that sometimes life looks a little bit more like wilderness wandering and, a little bit more of wondering, did we get it wrong?

Is something happened? Why are we not being removed from the suffering that we're experiencing? Well, Jesus sort of alludes to this. Even he says the truth will set you free. And so I think the important tension for us to hold, to hold together is that actually both that old woman and that that young, beautiful woman both exist in the same picture.

They both, are true. They're both a piece of the same story. I think the seeds for freedom and for joy and for gratitude, they can, be present only when we can acknowledge that pain and difficulty and struggle. They're not accidents. We didn't get something wrong. We didn't miss who this Jesus was. But struggle may actually be the most significant invitation that we can have to know who Jesus is and to become more like him.

Let me say that again. Struggle may actually be the biggest invitation so that we can know who Jesus is and ultimately become more like him. Well, I think, I think when I first really started to kind of come to terms with the struggles and the challenges, the things that I was experiencing and seeing around me, it sort of crystallized for me last summer, I was in a season of walking with a loved one through, a financial and a health and, vocational, just a crisis.

Her, her world was kind of coming in on herself, and her her body was failing, as well. And there was just no clear answers. There were problems. There were struggles. There were, loneliness and and just a lot, to kind of figure out and, I was and had found myself kind of, as her, her sole resource

person and to support her, because of the circumstances that she was in, I was also a couple of weeks into, something that's called renewal leave.

It's kind of like a sabbatical, and it's a very precious, period of time where you, can just, where clergy can just kind of take a season for renewal, for restoration. And lots of times people plan these really fun things, these really fun trips. I didn't I just wanted to work on my flowers and stay home and not travel.

And I found myself, with the two weeks into my renewal leave and coming to terms with the the depths of the situation going on with my loved one. And I realized that my renewal was going to look very different, than I had intended it to, to look. And, I remember saying to God, okay, God, I, I'm just going to pray that somehow you can find a way to renew me.

And despite all the struggles, that I'm going to be experiencing this summer, and somewhere deep in my heart, even in that very moment, right after I prayed that prayer, I heard God say, now I will actually renew you through your struggles. Now, I don't know that I would have believed that that could be happening, until I experienced it, but I think that's exactly what happened.

I think this is the example of Jesus. Jesus prayed, God, take this cup from me. He prays it in the Garden of Gethsemane. He does not act. He knows he came to die. And he said, God, take this cup from me. And it wasn't removed, and it wasn't removed because, because God's mean, that's not true.

But it wasn't removed, I think because as God knew and Jesus knew that suffering is actually part of life, we can't not suffer. We can do lots of things to try not to. Sometimes our suffering is self-induced. That's not good. That's not what I'm talking about. But but suffering, is something that all of us will experience at some point in life.

And it's not a sign that God doesn't love us or that we're doing it wrong. In the midst of walking with my, family member and our health challenges, I heard a conversation with her doctor. I don't think I'll ever forget it. And I don't even know if he meant it to be profound, but it was, he was kind of rounding, and she was.

And he was asking her, how are you doing? She's like, I'm doing okay, but I sure wish you could do something about the pain that I'm having. He said, yeah, all my patients, they want me to to do away with pain, but to be human, to be alive, it's to have pain. There's really only two ways not to have pain.

One is to be medicated so much that you don't experience the even the good things in life, and the other is to die, to be human, to be alive is to have pain. And wow, you could have knocked me over. In that moment, I realized something about Jesus, actually, that his pain and his suffering, we know that it was to give up his life.

But I think we get to see it up close and personal. Because if you haven't experienced that, the depth of suffering and abandonment and betrayal, if you haven't experienced, I pray you never do. But my sense is you might, you will. My sense is you will see suffering happens. It's part of the human life. And pain is actually not our enemy.

There's so many things that we do in our life to try to kill the pain, to numb out. Whether it's doom scrolling, whether it's drugs and alcohol, whether it's just Netflix seeing ourselves to death or, or just for being so distracted. Friends, I can numb out crocheting. I love crochet, it's very productive. It's very fun.

It's very relaxing. But there are times where I know that, like, what I need to do is actually go, go pray or go call somebody, or something, or, and I just dig into my crochet. It's it's fun. It's beautiful. But it is still a way of numbing pain is actually information for us. Doctors will tell us that, if we feel pain, there's, there's people who have a disorder that they can't feel pain.

And it's really dangerous for them. They may have an infection that they can't feel in their body. And they would die from that rather than saying, hey, I need some help, and getting an

intervention to help to do that. Brenã© Brown says, when you kill the dark, you kill the light. And this is such a beautiful image to me that I think, points to what Jesus did.

He didn't, relish in the pain and the suffering that he felt, but he felt it, and he lived it. And he invites us to to live it as well. And to, recognize that the pain and the struggle and the suffering, it actually does something in us, transformative of Sam Martin Luther King Jr. He's somebody who understood this for sure.

And he wrote about some of these dynamics in an article called Suffering and Faith. He said this. He said, my personal trials have taught me that the the that have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering as my sufferings mounted, I soon realized that there were two ways I could respond to my situation, either to react with bitterness or to seek to transform the suffering into a creative force.

I decided to follow the latter course, recognizing the necessity for suffering. I have tried to make of it a virtue, if only to save myself from bitterness. I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and to heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemption.

There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness. But I am more convinced than ever that it is the power of God, and to social and individual salvation. So, like the Apostle Paul, I can now humbly, yet proudly say, I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus, the suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God more than ever, but more than ever before.

I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. You see, Martin Luther King, he, of course, would end up dying at the hands of a gunman, that he endured the kind of struggle that crystallizes, lays out very clearly what the pattern of suffering can do. It can lead to bitterness. It can lead to us recounting all the reasons why this is unjust, unjustified for us, that we don't deserve it.

The word good person, all those things can lead to bitterness, but it can also lead to a creative force of transformation. It's fuel for us. And he's even says that the cross is the power of God. And to social and individual salvation. Friends, things may or may not get better in our life. They just may or may not.

I pray that they do, and I pray that our lives are walking through green pastures, but they also are going to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death.

We may have the greener pastures in the mountain top in the, in the, you know, the and we may be in the valley of the shadow of death, but what we are reminded of and what Martin Luther King

Junior points to, is that we don't do this alone.

We do this because of the power of Jesus Christ at work through us. That is how what he was is a messiah. He's a messiah who suffered. He's a messiah who allows us to suffer with meaning, who allows us to keep our hearts and our minds focused on what true salvation is. Christ's way was lived out best through that.

That what he said and what he did in the Last Supper, he reminded us that his blood is poured out and his body is broken for us, and it becomes for us a model of healing and of restoration. Every single time we partake in the Lord's Supper, we can rehearse the power of this creative, transforming love. That's, that that allows us to become, to become a new person.

So listen to these words from the Apostle Paul in first Corinthians 11:23 to 26. He says, for I receive from the Lord what I also passed on to you, the Lord Jesus. On the night that he was betrayed, he took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it. And he said, this is my body, which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, the cup, this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. And do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me. For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Every time we participate in this holy meal, we are reminded that suffering does not get the last word. But we cannot so quickly go over the suffering that we that we lose the depth of what it was that what it means for Jesus to have suffered? Paul was getting at for us to remember his sacrifice and in so doing, find our own new life.

I think at the I think the secret for all of this is learning to die before we die. Learning to die before

we die. This is at the heart of the good news in John 12 verse 24, Jesus says, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds.

In Romans five, I believe that they're true as well. We also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character and character.

Hope. Real hope. This is Ashley's commentary. Real hope. Not just wishy washy, hope that, maybe someday things will change, but actual hope, rooted in the transforming power of Jesus and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Jesus gives us, the trajectory that we're on with this in John 10:10 when he says, I come so that you may have life and have it to the full. And Jesus says in Matthew and Mark and Luke, he says, take up your cross and follow me. And he says again, come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. That's the power that we get in transformed suffering, where we can come alongside, where we can awaken to the one to whom Jesus really was and what it was that he really did.

Where we can look squarely in the face of our own suffering and know that it is not in vain. It is actually a transform of creative force. All of this happens at the table of grace. It's brokenness and it's suffering that turns into sustenance and power for each of us. It looks like death, but it's actually life. The disciples didn't get it wrong, and neither do we.

Life is hard. It is hard. It is really hard. And it is really, really beautiful. You'll go outside today and you'll see the sun shining. You'll, think of a friend or a family member that, that just gets you. You'll see a new baby, who is born? Who just, makes all the shadows of the world pass away.

But as Martin Luther King junior says, he reminds us that we have two choices. That we can let the seeds of transformation actually die as bitterness. Or they can transform our sufferings into a creative force. That's what Jesus chose. And his sacrificial love. It will redeem all of our pain and all of our suffering, and empower us in ways that only comes from brokenness.

So last summer, when I was in that midst of renewal, and doing what felt like impossible, I cannot even tell you how many impossible things. Situations I felt like we were experiencing last summer. Todd, my husband Todd, and I ended up being out of town for about two weeks. We were. She lives in a far, far, far away from here in another state, and we were gone for about two weeks.

And our original plan, when we were planning to go, was five days. We ended up being there for for two weeks. And, I have a thing for, for flowers. And I have a pretty extensive, cutting garden that I, that I grow and, but it takes a good long time to water it, every day.

And we were gone, and this was July. And, so I asked my neighbor, could you just water? And I just went through the whole thing, and I was like, oh, I don't know. Just every 2 or 3 days would be fine. It's no big deal. You know, if we get rain, you can skip a day and whatever.

Well, she did exactly what I asked her to do. But we just ended up being gone for a really, really, really long time. So, when I got home, a lot of my flowers were crispy, and I was so sad because, again, really hard things I'd been facing. Also lots of miraculous things. That's that's part of anyway.

But I so I'm looking at these flowers and I'm like I so my ultimate goal with these flowers was to to harvest some seeds. And I knew that and I thought, well, I have a real head start on my seeds. I can just I'm either gonna have to, like, prune everything, or I can just go ahead and let them go to seed now.

And, so I just decided that's what I do. I knew it would mean the fewer bouquets, but I just would let them go to seed. There's a couple days later, and I was still sad about it. And I realize I remembered that scripture, actually, about the seed. Unless, unless it's unless a seed dies.

Oh, gosh. Now I can't say it right. What is it? Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it remains. It produces many seeds. And I realized that that's exactly what the seeds of suffering were doing. And that because I was allowing my crispy flowers to go to seed, I would have, an opportunity for more seeds to be produced, seeds that first had to die, in order for them to have, an exponential, harvest there.

Well, friends, death is not the end. Jesus's witness at the Last Supper, reminds us of that. That what looks like suffering is actually a victory.