

## How To Be Human: Suffer

A sermon preached on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 on Sunday, June 7, 2026,  
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I.

Today begins the longest season of the church year called “Ordinary Time,” so named for the lack of big splashy church holidays in the near future. In ordinary time, the church house isn’t filled with poinsettias or lilies. Rarely is anyone going to show up in their brand new dress for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost! Ordinary time is, well, *ordinary*, much like the many days of our lives stretched between peaks and valleys. But among the gifts of ordinary time are the gifts of listening to how Jesus lived between the manger and the tomb – in the long, daily middle where a life is built every single day. Learning to live in ordinary time is an act of faithfulness.<sup>1</sup>

But learning to live in ordinary time is also learning to live as a human. Perhaps you think – *I’m a human, how else would I be living?* This summer, we’re taking the prompt “how to be human” and listening through the stories of Jesus in Matthew to hear common threads and encouragements within. For in an age where all manner of tech overlords, and inventions, and greedy politicians, and angry people on the internet would have us to outsource our humanness – dulling it down, and squandering it away – we must remember why God saw fit to become human, why these ordinary matters of flesh and bone and head and heart allow us to move through the world together, fully human, fully alive.

II.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Kate Bowler for this phrase, “learning to live in ordinary time,” from her book, *Everything Happens... and Other Lies I’ve Loved*.

Now I knew that starting the series with a sermon title, “How To Be Human: Suffer,” might not be the softest launching point, am I right? You may have read that and assumed that to be human *is* to suffer, that one can’t know humaning if they’re not suffering. Or perhaps you read it like a question – how to be human? *Suffer!*

But we all know that suffering is a fundamental part of the human experience that comes for us all. Like death and taxes, so too is suffering unavoidable in this life. Your legs don’t work like they used to. Your eyes blur, ears muffle, speech slows. A trauma to the heart or injury to the body forces you to relearn how to exist in your world through this here flesh.<sup>2</sup> Your suffering may take place in silence, dislocating you from community, or perhaps suffering ushers you ever more deeply into relationship with others. Or perhaps both resonate with you, just depending on the day.

Suffering has a way of dis-integrating us. Not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. As Barbara Brown Taylor noted, “the questions people ask about God in Sunday school rarely compare with the questions we ask while we are in the hospital... pain makes theologians of us all.”<sup>3</sup> She notes, though, that while pain happens in the body, suffering happens in the mind – making meaning of that pain, wrestling with its impact, its wreckage, its aftermath.<sup>4</sup> *Why is this happening to me or the person I love?*, we cry out. *Where even is God?*

If there can be good news amidst suffering, it’s that we’re not alone in those questions. For perhaps the most persistent question humans have had for God since the very start is why there is suffering when God is so good. So

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<sup>2</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, p43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p161.

what are we to learn about our humanness while suffering? How might we resist the urge to avoid it, deny it, numb it, run from it, or fight it, and rather sit with it, learn from it, engage with it, let our suffering integrate us instead?

### III.

As our story begins today from the Gospel of Matthew, we meet Jesus performing wondrous acts of all kinds. “As Jesus was walking along,” the writer tells us, “he saw a man called Matthew sitting at his tax booth, and said to him, ‘follow me.’ And Matthew got up and followed him.” It’s an astonishing story of call, for we don’t know what Matthew thought of Jesus’s command, why he followed, what he thought he was getting into, and why Jesus called a *tax collector* of all people – as shady and smarmy a character as any. We don’t know, we simply know that at the command of Jesus, the word that stilled the sea and healed the sick, also compelled Matthew to leave behind his tax booth and follow the Messiah.

More miracles await in a pair of stories where one starts, another interrupts, and the first concludes, a pair informed one by another. For a leader in the synagogue rushes to Jesus with terrible news that his daughter has just died. “If Jesus would come and but lay his hand on her,” he begs, “she would live again.” In this precise moment of need, in all his agitation and distress, any norms or pretenses that would keep a respected, reserved leader like this in his expected place have been all but abandoned. The man presses his way to Jesus up front, collapses at Jesus’ feet, and pleads with Jesus to come to his daughter’s aid. There is no limit to what a loving parent will do to save their beloved child’s life, you see.

Jesus came with him, but the story is interrupted. Another act of desperation, this time from a woman who for 12 long years, had suffered

bleeding. Her suffering was not just physical, but emotional, mental, and social. As one considered ritually unclean, it meant no entering the temple, no touching others or being touched without attaching her uncleanness to another. Isolation and loneliness were her daily truth, and not one of the physicians she spent her years and her money to see could stop the hemorrhaging. So overlooked, Matthew doesn't even give her a name. And yet, in this precise moment of need, in all her agitation and distress, any norms or pretenses that would keep the woman in her expected place away from others have been all but abandoned. Instead, she presses her way to Jesus from behind, risking the crowd and reaching for just a brush of her fingers to his cloak. There is no limit to what a distressed and weary one will do to finally find relief, you see.

To both of the suffering daughters, Jesus spoke words of power. "Take heart, daughter," he says to the woman bleeding, "your faith has made you well." "Go away," he says to the people crowding the leader's daughter's deathbed. "For the girl is not dead but sleeping." Human suffering gave way to human healing. With every opportunity to ignore, turn away, brush off, Jesus leaned in, looked, and touched, honoring their suffering with the dignity of love.

#### IV.

I'll tell you when I first sat with today's text, I wondered why the lectionary writers paired Matthew's call with the two suffering daughters. But it's not an accident; there's a link here, articulated beautifully by author Sara Miles. "Jesus calls his disciples," she says, "giving us authority to heal and sending us out. ... He doesn't show us how to make a blind man see, dry every tear, or even drive out all kinds of demons. But he shows us how to enter into

a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love, and given meaning. In which strangers literally touch each other, and in doing so, make a community spacious enough for everyone.”<sup>5</sup>

It forms us, this call among the suffering. It makes me think of the church, and how church must not only be a school of love, but it must be a school of humaning, a place of remembering who and whose we are, a people of seeing and knowing and loving all the same. Or, as Brene Brown has said, “I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away... but church isn’t like an epidural; it’s like a midwife... I thought faith would say, ‘I’ll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, ‘I’ll sit with you in it.’”<sup>6</sup> We, the church, are given the sacred task of going into a suffering world – not to get specific with the healing (that’s Jesus’s job!), but to see, to be with, to midwife, to let our own suffering knit us to the suffering ones we encounter. To look towards the daughters on the margins. To see the human in the desperate eyes of the overlooked. To resist the trap of allowing a number – the number dead in a war, the number racked with cancer, the number wounded by abuse, the number deported and detained – to obscure the individual human lives behind each 1 or 2, 6 or 7, 100 or one million. The body called Jesus went to the suffering, so must we who are the body of Christ do the same.

It might just be the hardest call we have, though, the kind that feels like a cross taken up to follow. I don’t know about you, but this seeing and midwifing and humaning for others as disciples of Christ can feel distant, hard, downright impossible when we ourselves are in a suffering season.

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding Healing Raising the Dead*, p105.

<sup>6</sup> “Brene Brown: Jesus Wept,” video from *The Work of the People*, [theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-wept](http://theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-wept)

When our health fails, and our bodies age, and our wounds seem never to heal, and all we can muster is to beg Jesus for relief. When the forests of fear and rage form a canopy of despair so thick, it feels futile to find the light filtering through. When thickets of patriarchy and oligarchy, facism and racism, global warming and global reckoning all press so tightly around us, we reach for the hem of a cloak we're not even sure is there to grasp.

## V.

Toni Morrison's exquisite novel *Beloved* has a scene that is unforgettable to all who read it. Baby Suggs, the matriarch, gathers all her people in what's called the Clearing: "a wide-open place," as Morrison describes, "cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what... Every Saturday afternoon, Baby Suggs would pilgrim to the Clearing. On this day, she was in its center, perched on a huge flat-sided rock, head bowed and praying. All the people with her watched quietly from the trees, watching for the signal."

"Baby Suggs lifted her eyes to the treeline, and in Morrison's words, shouted, 'let the children come!' and they ran from the trees toward her. 'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then 'Let the grown men come,' she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. 'Let your wives and your children see you dance,' she told them, and groundlife shuddered underneath their feet."

Finally, in Morrison's words, "Baby Suggs called the women to her. 'Cry,' she told them. 'For the living and the dead. Just cry.' And without covering their eyes the women let loose. It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children

cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.”

“She did not tell them,” Morrison says, “to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them that they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they could not have it.”

“‘Here,’ Baby Suggs said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard.’ And one body part to the next, she tells her community of Black folks around her – eyes, back, hands, mouth, feet, shoulders, arms, neck, liver, lungs, womb, heart – ‘love them,’ she says. ‘They won’t love them, but you do. Love them hard.’ Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.”<sup>7</sup>

## VI.

Friends, may the church be a Clearing for you to bring the fullness of your human selves toward Love and one another. May the way of discipleship for us be a way of midwifing that accompanies the suffering toward healing. May the gift of being human in this ordinary time draw us all ever nearer to Jesus who goes into the dead places to take our hands and pull us back to life

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, p102-104. Thanks, also, to this beautiful sermon that references it: <https://charlestonkahu.wordpress.com/2019/08/12/the-sermon-in-the-clearing/>

again. Grace unimaginable, you might say, but nothing short of love.  
Amen!