

We are in the spiritual journey of the road between the now and the not yet. We are on the journey of “now” as we know ourselves to be currently and on the journey of “not yet” as we are becoming, equipping, and growing constantly. Through his life and death, Jesus taught us that we must lose our life (small ‘l’) in order to gain that which is Life indeed (capital ‘L’).

In his *The Human Condition*, Father Thomas Keating writes, “The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of small humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound. These make room inside us for the Holy Spirit to come and heal. What prevents us from being available to God is gradually evacuated [as] we keep getting closer to our Center.” (New York: Paulist, 199, p. 38)

The goal of the Christian journey is surrender. It is the ability to trust God with our whole selves and our very lives – rather than relying on attempts to achieve safety and security, affection and approval, power and control for ourselves on our own terms. Our own Christian tradition provides a road map for the journey between the “now” of living primarily out of false-self patterns and the “not yet” of living as our true-self-in-God. On our spiritual journey we are molded and equipped by many mixed experiences, especially by our struggling and suffering. Our suffering awakens us to the fact that we rely on and attach to that which is not God. Our suffering helps to detach from the false things and to rely on God, so we become more clearly convinced that God still loves us, cares for us, guides us, and blesses us no matter what the circumstances. This season of the spiritual journey can feel like a kind of death because something really is dying – the false self is falling away so that the true-self-in-God can emerge more fully. Let us ask God to change our heart to make us true and to be like God as we continue to go on our spiritual journey with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

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Life Together In Christ (5)

The Nature of the Spiritual Journey

Luke 24:25-26

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When was the time you grew the most? When was the time that you felt closest to God in your spiritual life? Many of us might think of a time when we had to endure pain, loss or suffering. Sometimes what we gained was so valuable that we might even say, “Even though it was hard, I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

I remember my experiences of suffering when I was in boot camp in the army. From 7:00 am to 9:00 pm my boot camp fellows and I did many challenging drills, endured several punishments, and memorized some phrases on duties as army soldiers. At the end of boot camp, we talked to each other, saying “We will never drop by this place again after we are discharged from army duty and we even won’t urinate toward this place.” Even though my boot camp was a kind of suffering and hateful experience, I became stronger physically and learned discipline, endurance and perseverance during boot camp and the army experience.

My other suffering experiences were several failures in my attempts at graduate school in Korea and at seminary in the United States. I spent much time studying in the library and taking exams over and over again until I finally got a good score to be accepted to the graduate school in Seoul and the seminary in New Jersey. As I shared with you before, the most painful failure experience was when I served at a Korean-American congregation in New Jersey. But those failed experiences made me draw closer to God, to be humble, and to try to do my best in every single moment, even in challenging situations. In the process of overcoming my failures, I taught myself, ‘Never give up no matter what circumstances’ and I learned to have perseverance, faith, and hope in challenging moments. Each of you may have experiences of your own

sufferings in your lives and some you are struggling with suffering now. But some of those suffering experiences might be a valuable experience in your spiritual journey.

Jesus helped the two disciples on the Emmaus Road to draw attention to the nature of the spiritual journey – the paschal rhythm of death, burial and resurrection as the essential rhythm of the spiritual life, and of suffering as a necessary part of it. In today's text Jesus captured the essence of the special journey, saying *"Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"* (26)

Jesus tried to describe this aspect of the spiritual life earlier on while he was still with his disciples, but it was impossible for them to grasp it until they were experiencing it for themselves. In Matthew 16 Jesus told his disciples that he *"must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering"* and eventually be killed. But Peter rebuked Jesus, saying, *"Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you."* Jesus said to him, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"* (Matthew 16:21-23).

In our attempts to be loyal and faithful and helpful, like Peter, we too could be a distraction and even a stumbling block to one another if we fail to understand the nature of the journey. Members of a spiritual community have fundamentally different ideas about what the spiritual journey is all about. For instance, some Christians emphasize a "success gospel." They believe that the sign of God's blessing is that everything is always "up and to the right." Yoido Full Gospel Church, the world largest church, is well known as the "triple gospel." It is taken from 3 John 1:2, saying *"Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well."* They believe that if our soul is getting along well, God will bless us with our physical health and material needs. Other Christians understand that the "triple gospel" is a cheap gospel. They emphasize a "gospel of the cross." They believe that we Christians

we need to be ready for suffering for God's kingdom, as we share the Good News to other people and do our effort for justice in our society. As we have different perspectives in theology and faith practices, we could actually do more harm than good in our attempts to companion one another!

One of the most valuable offerings we can make to one another is to "see through" what is really going on, no matter how painful the events and experiences might be. God is at work even in our suffering and our suffering can be redemptive if we allow it to be. Jesus was pointing out that his disciples were not merely witnesses to a terrible injustice; they were actually witnessing the great saving act of God in and through Jesus' suffering and the sacrifice of his life.

The word 'paschal' comes from the Hebrew 'pesach,' or "Passover." It came from the story of the exodus, in which the blood of an unblemished lamb marking the doorposts of the Israelites' homes prompted the angel of death to pass over them as it moved through the land of Egypt. The firstborn sons of those who placed their trust in God by keeping his instruction lived, but the firstborn of those who did not died. The ability to trust God became such a defining characteristic of the Jewish people. So they celebrate it annually to this day. In the same way the blood of the Passover lamb protected Israelite households from certain death, Jesus' blood covers us, protects us and brings about our salvation.

Even though the disciples hadn't been able to make sense of it yet, Jesus' journey from death to life revealed the true nature of the spiritual life. He signaled to them that we too must "die" if we desire to be raised to new life in Christ. Likewise, we must lay down anything that is a hindrance to us spiritually, so we can walk in newness of life. What needs to die in us are our sins, negative patterns and false-self attachments. What needs to die in us is the set of illusions that is the false self. The true self – our very essence – is hidden with Christ in God and is waiting to be revealed (Colossians 3:1-3)