

Suffering and beyond

By [Michael A. King](#)

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In my [Living By the Word](#) column on this week's readings, I comment on Paul's readiness to boast of suffering, because it "produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. . . ." Suffering is a signal doorway through which the Holy Spirit enters our lives. As an Anabaptist, I also see suffering as integrally connected with the decision to take up our cross. As we emulate Jesus' confrontations with the principalities and powers, they will often lash back and cause us suffering.

My Anabaptism is rooted in generations of Mennonite predecessors. In [The Merging](#), my aunt Evelyn King Mumaw traces my grandfather's ancestry back to Melchior Brönniman in 17th-century Switzerland. When asked to renounce his faith at pain of torture and death, Brönniman instead affirmed it and so was imprisoned in a castle in Thun. After some years he was released, but Switzerland remained inhospitable. Brönniman and family emigrated to America, where eventually my grandfather was born. All this helps me understand my "but of course" reaction to a view such as Paul's that suffering is to be boasted of, even courted.

But let me also look now at the shadows of such a perspective. While some might benefit these days from a dose of Anabaptist-Mennonite familiarity with and commitment to suffering, those of us who were almost born on a cross might also benefit from counter-emphases. Sometimes we wrestle with the sense that we are not being true Christian if at times we feel joy in our lives, fulfillment in our callings, satisfaction in accomplishments for which we are not killed or tortured but possibly even (get thee behind me Satan!) feted.

As one mentor told me a decade or two ago, at a suffering-ridden juncture in my own life, my Anabaptism sometimes tempted me to take up my cross even when I didn't need to, to embrace suffering even when courting joy might be more appropriate. (This individual was a mainline Protestant, so perhaps, as I was once taught, not as true a follower of Jesus.) My mentor thought—as befitted, perhaps,

one whose own ancestors had likely tortured mine—that Mennonites were perhaps a tad too eager to be sacrificial lambs. Did we ourselves always need to be the lambs? Hadn't Christ already filled that job description?

I still think about those comments. Faithfully following Jesus can embroil us in suffering. We then will often experience the comforter, the supporter, the spirit of Jesus who joins us in such suffering for his sake. Yet it is also wise to ponder that, in traveling toward offering ourselves up as living sacrifices, we need not replicate all that Christ has already done for us even as we faithfully follow on.

Additional lectionary columns by King appear in the May 18 issue of the Century
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