Sunday, March 1st Sermon

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 53:1-12 and John 13:1-17

Good morning.

Before I begin, I want to share a small piece of personal news. This past week, I defended my doctoral dissertation. My research focused on how Christians understand suffering, spirituality, and liberation — especially in relation to disabled people and communities.

I am deeply grateful to be finished, and I am excited to share with you this morning a small part of that work.

In particular, one scriptural image I wrestled with—and am still wrestling with—is one we often encounter during Holy Week: **the suffering servant** from Isaiah 53 and commonly interpreted as illustrated in John 13.

Many of us carry an inherited or reflexive understanding of what that means.

When we hear "suffering servant," we tend to imagine someone who is:

1. **Despised and rejected** — socially cast off, unwanted.
2. **Without agency** — someone things happen to rather than someone who acts.
3. **Spiritually elevated because they suffer** — as though pain itself makes them holy.
4. **An object of pity** — someone we feel sorry for rather than someone we recognize as powerful.

And when that image settles into our theology, it does not stay abstract.

It shapes how we see real people.

We begin to project that image onto those whose lives we interpret as marked by suffering — especially those whose bodies or circumstances do not fit our cultural standards of strength, independence, or productivity.

Sometimes suffering is real — the result of illness, injustice, exclusion, or harm. But sometimes what we label as "suffering" is actually our discomfort with difference.

Disability, for example, is often treated as synonymous with suffering. And yet many disabled people will tell you that what wounds most deeply is not their body, but the physical and social barriers of the world around them — stairs without ramps, silence without captions, communities without access, assumptions without understanding.

In other words, suffering is often socially produced.

And when we merge "suffering servant" with our assumptions about certain bodies, we risk turning people into symbols.

We romanticize endurance and spiritualize exclusion.
We turn tragedy into virtue and call it God's will.

Personally, I find a powerful response to this in the work of disability theologian and activist Nancy Eiesland.

Nancy Eiesland was Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion and Disability Studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. She also consulted with the United Nations on its Convention on the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. She helped bring the insights of the secular disability rights movement into theological discourse and shaped conversations within the Church about disability as a matter of justice and human dignity — not tragedy.

Eiesland herself was disabled. She had a congenital bone defect in her hips. By the age of thirteen, she had undergone eleven surgeries. She knew pain intimately. And yet she resisted the idea that disability should be reduced to personal suffering. She argued that what disables people is often not their bodies, but the physical and social barriers around them — inaccessible buildings, narrow definitions of normal, communities that exclude rather than accommodate.

Her landmark book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, is widely recognized as the beginning of disability theology as a distinct field. In it, she bridged disability studies and theology, insisting that disabled people are not objects of charity but members of an oppressed and marginalized community whose experiences must shape how we understand God.

She argued that Christ becomes disabled through crucifixion and retains his disability in the resurrection — bearing the marks of violence — and that in doing so, Christ stands in solidarity with disabled people. Pushing back against the "normative," able-bodied image of Jesus, she offered instead a disability-centered vision of the divine.

She writes:

> **"I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged 'not feasible,' 'unemployable,' with 'questionable quality of life.' Here was God for me."** (89)

On the screen is a picture of TikTok influencer Janey Carter in her sip-puff wheelchair. A small tube rests near her mouth. By gently sipping and puffing air into that tube, she can move forward, backward, left, and right. Breath becomes motion. This assistive device enables Janey to move through the world with agency.

That is the image Eiesland saw when she imagined Christ.

Not a helpless figure.
Not a tragic body.
Not an object of pity.

But God as disabled — a God whose body bears limitation, who looks and moves through the world differently from what is considered "normal," and yet who remains fully agent, fully powerful, fully present.

For Eiesland, to say that God is disabled is not to say that God stands in solidarity with those whose bodies are marked as different. It is to say that divine power does not depend on conformity to cultural standards of ability.

In that vision, disability is not erased. It is dignified.

Now here is the crucial point.

Eiesland says Christ is not a “pitiable, suffering servant.” And she says that for a reason.

Within disability theology, the figure of Isaiah 53’s “suffering servant” has drawn increasing scrutiny. For generations, Christians have interpreted Isaiah 53 as a messianic prophecy about Jesus — and many see Jesus kneeling in John 13, washing the disciples’ feet, as the embodiment of that servant.

But it is not that simple.

Because if we continue to understand “suffering servant” in the shallow terms Eiesland rejects — as passive, tragic, spiritually valuable because of pain — then Isaiah 53 can become dangerous.

A shallow reading only hears the words “despised” and “rejected.” It turns the servant into a prototype of redemptive suffering — as though suffering itself is what saves.

And when that logic moves from Christ to real people — especially vulnerable people, including disabled people — harm follows.

We must be careful not to turn Isaiah 53 into a model that glorifies suffering.

The problem is not Isaiah 53. The problem is how we read it.

Isaiah 53 does not celebrate humiliation. It does not sanctify oppression. It actually reveals violence and exposes what the world does to the servant.

And it also presents the servant as anything but passive. The servant is not dragged unwillingly. The servant acts in obedience. The servant accepts a vocation. The text portrays someone who knowingly walks a path aligned with God’s purpose to be in solidarity with humanity — not as a helpless victim, but as a willing agent.

While the servant suffers tremendously at the hands of others, the text emphasizes intention, resolve, and participation in God’s work.

If we read Isaiah 53 not as a blueprint for glorifying suffering, but as a revelation of God entering into the world’s rejection with agency and purpose, then it aligns deeply with what Eiesland saw.

The servant is not pitiable.
The servant is not tragic.
The servant has agency even when despised.

And we see that servant clearly in John 13 when Jesus kneels and washes his disciples’ feet.

Foot washing was the lowest task in the household. It was the work of a servant. Dusty roads, sandaled feet — this was not symbolic politeness. It was embodied humility.

But John is careful to tell us something before Jesus kneels. Jesus acts “knowing that he had come from God and was going to God.” He knows who he is. He knows where he comes from and where he is going.

He kneels not out of humiliation, but out of authority. Not because he is diminished, but because he is secure.

This act takes place on the threshold of his death. It foreshadows what is coming — betrayal, crucifixion, violence. And yet he kneels anyway. Not as a passive victim, but as one who freely enters that path aligned with God's purpose.

This is not a servant crushed by fate.
This is a servant who moves toward suffering without surrendering his identity.

And resurrection will not erase that identity — it will vindicate it.

In washing their feet, Jesus enacts solidarity. He lowers himself without losing himself. He serves without becoming pitiable. He chooses love.

That is the suffering servant.

If Christ kneels in solidarity with those judged "not feasible," "unemployable," with "questionable quality of life,"
then the church cannot be a place of pity —

As Eiesland says,
"The disabled God defines the church as a communion of justice." (104)

A community where difference is not erased but dignified.
Where no one is reduced to a symbol or romanticized for their pain and where love kneels down to do the dirty work.

Amen.