ANOTHER NAME FOR EVERY THING

with

RICHARD ROHR

Season 1, Episode 7

The Path of Great Suffering

Paul Swanson: Welcome to season one of Another Name For Every Thing, conversations with Richard Rohr exploring the core themes of his new book, The Universal Christ.

Brie Stoner: As mentioned previously, this podcast is recorded on the grounds of The Center for Action and Contemplation and may contain the quirky sounds of our neighborhood and setting. We are your hosts.

Paul Swanson: Paul Swanson.

Brie Stoner: And Brie Stoner. We're staff members of the Center for Action and Contemplation and students of this contemplative path, trying our best to live the wisdom of this tradition amidst meal planning, taking out the garbage, and the shifting state of our world.

Paul Swanson: This is the seventh of twelve weekly episodes. Today we discuss chapters 12 and 13, "Why did Jesus Die," and "It Can't Be Carried Alone." In this episode we explore the history of the theory of atonement, where it came from and how it has influenced Christianity's message.

One more thing before we get started. Brie and I are having a blast being in conversation with Richard, and we would love to hear what questions are arising for you as you listen to this podcast or read the book. So if you have a burning question related to the themes of The Universal Christ that just won't leave you alone, head over to cac.org/podcast and follow the instructions there to submit your question. After this season is over, we'll sift through the submissions, pour a glass of something tasty, ask Richard your questions, and then share his responses with all of you.

Brie Stoner: Richard, we want to discuss a couple of chapters in your book that I think are so important for many of us who especially grew up with an atonement-based view of the cross and a very transactional view. And I groaned when we sat down to start recording this, because I was like, "Oh, here we go. We're going to get into atonement."

Richard Rohr: Here we go again.

Brie Stoner: But I think back on my childhood and how many songs and hymns I grew up with that are just full—

Richard Rohr: Full of it.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. --of this perspective

Richard Rohr: The hymnology is especially bad.

Brie Stoner: Oh, yeah. Did know this one? "What can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus." Wait for it. "What can make me whole again, nothing but the blood of Jesus." And, I mean, that's just one of like—

Richard Rohr: I know.

Brie Stoner: --so many.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It's a lovely melody—

Richard Rohr: It is a nice melody.

Paul Swanson: --with some difficult phrases in there.

Brie Stoner: Difficult.

Richard Rohr: That's the essence of transaction.

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Magical religion, yeah.

Brie Stoner: And it's just through so much of that, our sort of cultural assumptions of what Christianity is all about. Anyway, Paul and I were joking because we were, like, we should basically just have a hymn off. I mean, you could if you wanted to, like bringing up all of the atonement-based language that's gotten so entrenched.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Also, the phrase I've noticed is the "wrath of God."

Brie Stoner: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: So many hymns talk about the "wrath of God," which in the Trinitarian theology is impossible.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, yeah.

Richard Rohr: It's a human emotion, and why I say in the book it's not God who's violent, it's we who are, and we want God to fit our definition. God doesn't follow our juris prudence, our tit for tat, you did this much sin, you deserve this much punishment. That's a courtroom, that's not the divine realm, that's not the

Richard Rohr: kingdom of God. But, again, it's like we said, we're still in the early stages. History itself hadn't produced many people who understood restorative justice. So, retribution is quid pro quo, tit for tat. And so, we even understood the cross in this mechanical way, which is why, also, so many of our hymns thank Jesus. It's all about "Thank you for doing this," and not realizing this eliminates our participation. It's just, "He did it, so we don't have to do it. We can be wealthy, and prejudiced, and everything else and not worry about it.

So, restorative justice, I really encourage you to go to most of the prophets, I can't say all of them, but they will start and spend most of their time on what sure looks like retributive justice. It's filled with threats. "I will do this to you, Israel, I will pour out my fury." So you can see why people were able, biblical people, to have this notion of the wrath of God. But what I challenge people to do is stay with every prophet and see where he finally breaks through to. And where he finally breaks through to is what we now call restorative justice. I usually describe it this way. You've been terrible, you deserve punishment, I'm angry at you, but finally after threatening them for five chapters, the prophet will say, "But here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to love you even more. I will love you, Israel, I will court you and make you my own." Just check it out. Don't believe me.

The most famous one is Ezekiel 16. And by the end of Ezekiel 16, that's where I think we

got the very word. He uses the word "restore" I think, eight times in a row. "I will restore. I will restore. I will restore," that God loves us not by our notion of vindictive punishment. How would that create loving people? We should have been able to figure that out. Would you love someone who tortured you for five years? I don't think so. That was our notion of purgatory.

Divine love is not in that frame of quid pro quo. It's infinite love, but we couldn't form the concept of infinite—infinite mercy, infinite forgiveness—which restored. You fall in love with someone who crosses the line of quid pro quo. You just said a bad thing to your husband or your wife and you're sitting there feeling superior, and then they cross the line and come over to you and say, "Honey, it's okay," or whatever it might be. That's what makes you fall in love with your husband or wife, not "I'm going to punish you." Whatever made us think that would work?

But it was the classic we created God in our image. That's our notion of justice. So, our word for that is "retribution," tit for tat. I always use the example of the evening news. You see it almost every night, someone saying, "I want justice." And they mean "I suffered, now I want to make sure you suffer because I suffered." So, that's the lowest level of consciousness. And the word has only emerged in the last thirty years, really. But what I'm happy to announce is, it was already given to us by the prophets and by Jesus. Jesus punishes no one. "Oh," people say, "I never noticed that." He isn't going around punishing, He goes around healing. So, if you want just an ordinary word for restorative justice, use the word healing, and then you recognize that's just about all Jesus does: heal, heal, heal, heal, heal, you know, not punish.

People can't fight me on that one. But they sit there almost aghast, and, "Why didn't I ever notice that. Why didn't I ever think that?" Well, you can't see what you're not told to pay attention to. I mean, we've only had non-violent

Richard Rohr: revolutions in the last hundred years, and very feebly at that—the Czech Velvet Revolution, the Phillipine Revolution. But what revolutions meant before that was Waterloo, you know. One group has to be totally slaughtered so another group can claim victory. So, we had no frame really in which to understand a win-win version of the gospel. Everything was win-lose.

And, if you don't mind me saying, we now have a president who mirrors that to the nth degree. I won. And because I won, that's truth. And you lost; therefore, you're useless. I mean, he says something to that effect almost every third day. Oh my gosh. So, it's going to be slow in coming because 40 percent of America doesn't see through that, which tells me they're still trapped in quid pro quo, tit for tat, make them suffer.

Paul Swanson: And that's been the dominant atonement substitutionary theory that has kind of overwhelmed what folks think of when they think of Christianity.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: I wonder if you can kind of speak to that, about how did that, and it is a theory—

Richard Rohr: That's right.

Paul Swanson: --how did that theory become the dominant one, and what other theories are out there that can help us see more of a restorative path?

Richard Rohr: Well, as always you asked the question well, to point out that we were honest enough to use the word "theory," because that's all it was. But it's a theory that so gained dominance, especially after the Protestant Reformation, where the mind was still mechanical in the 16th century. It was still transactional. It's not their fault, it's the best they could do. But are you asking me to give even a quick history?

Paul Swanson: Just a quick history of that, yeah.

Richard Rohr: Quick. All right, I'll make it as quick as I can. Okay.

Brie Stoner: Take your time, Richard. We got time.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. This is an important point.

Richard Rohr: We saw all words in the Bible that are there without any doubt: propitiation, atonement, sacrifice, ransom, paid the price, opened the gates, died for our sins. Those are the dominant metaphorical phrases. Except for the last one, "died for our sins," all the others are words that would have been popular in the Old Testament for temple sacrifice, which clearly was quid pro quo. "We have to

Richard Rohr: kill this many heifers, this many goats, this many sheep, it must have been horrible. But you see what's operative. When you still think you've got to make sacrifices, then your god is not a lover. Your god has to be pleased, has to be placated, as we say. So, they saw those metaphors, not realizing they were only written to make sense to Jewish people because at that point, the Scriptures, they didn't know they were writing the Scriptures when they wrote the New Testament. The scriptures meant the Jewish Bible. So, and they think they're writing to reform of the Jewish religion. They didn't know Christianity was going to become its own enchilada, you know?

So, here was the consensus, not everybody, but the general consensus, the first thousand years, there's clearly a price that has to be paid, you know what, it's being paid to the devil. They just had to find some kind of quid pro quo explanation. Then in the 11th, 12th centuries, a father of the Church, I don't want to put him down; a Doctor of the Church I should say, not a father, the doctors come after the fathers. The fathers are the first centuries, then when later teachers rose to the authority of a father, they were called doctors. So, Anselm is a Doctor of the Church, and he wrote what we humorously called the most unfortunately, entirely successful, piece of theology ever written because it controlled the last thousand years. And he, thinking he's solving the problem says, "No, Jesus didn't need to placate the devil, He needed to placate God the Father," not realizing the disaster he was creating.

And, as you know, because of my men's work, I bring in this thing which is sincere, the high amount of people in history who had abusive fathers, authoritarian fathers, punitive fathers, alcoholic fathers, and absent fathers, we were just programmed to accept the Anselmian worldview. "Yep, Dad always has to be paid off. Don't shout, you'll wake up your daddy, you know. He's smoking now, he's reading the evening

paper." I mean, this was the story. I mean, punitive parenting, especially from the father, was expected in most, and still is in all of Asia, in most cultures until the 1950s, where little by little we gave the father permission to be a co-nurturer with the mother.

Again we get back to why Mary became so popular but why God the Father became so unpopular. I mean, this is what the whole "I and the Father are one" is the goal. Now when you make the father a tyrant, a sadist, a masochist, or whatever the right word is, who can't love you unless he gets blood sacrifice, you have just destroyed the whole equation. I don't know how you preach the gospel in the middle of that. It's certainly not a Trinitarian theology anymore. We've pushed Jesus on the throne, that what we once thought God the Father was on, although that's not even good, we again have top-down reward/punishment worldview—good guys and bad guys; not win-win, but win-lose.

So that dominated. Now, it didn't get to be called the "penal substitutionary atonement" I think until John Calvin. I'm told he introduced that word, "substitutionary." The idea that He was the substitute so we wouldn't have to

Richard Rohr: be punished, but He has to punish somebody. That's the lie in the whole thing: He punished Jesus and Jesus accepted the punishment. So, but even then in the 13th century, a century after Anselm, this started being seriously debated. The great, for us, the great iconic debate, wasn't held in one hall, it was people writing papers back and forth. But the two opinions were summarized in the Dominican Opinion, which accepted these metaphors. Yeah, it seems that the infinite justice of God demands sacrifice.

And our great hero, John Duns Scotus, who wrote a very rarefied theology, he isn't easy to understand, but I hope you can hear in his one concise sentence the summary of his whole side of the debate, which was called the Franciscan Opinion: Our predestination to glory is prior by nature to any notion of sin. Let me read it a second time: Our predestination to glory is prior by nature. It's in our very being that we're predestined to glory, and it can't be dependent on any notion of a sin. Because then he thought Jesus was only a problem solver, was only a mop-up exercise, was what we would now call Plan B. And no, he built on this alpha and omega, which is now coming to the fore with Teilhard calling Christ the Omega Point, Scotus was, "He's the Alpha. He's the beginning point. And the beginning point is unconditional love from God, from the very beginning, from the very start, Jesus is Plan A. Sin has nothing to do with it. So, the cross is the communication in dramatic symbol of the outpouring love of God toward creation.

Now only if you know the history of religion, and this isn't hard to document, but go to country after country, and in one form or another, human beings felt they had to offer their blood, or the blood of their oldest son, or virgin daughter to God. That's universal. Now, it finally morphs into sacrificing animals, which we have in Jesus' lifetime. And that, now you get the full import of the so-called "cleansing of the temple." He says, "Just stop this whole sacrificial factory. Stop it." And that's the meaning of the releasing of the animals from their cages. "My God doesn't need you placating Him. My God is love, infinitely so."

So Jesus Himself did not see His sacrifice as paying a price, but is simply making a statement about the infinite outpouring of love. So if the Father is the statement, the Christ is the making the statement visible. So the cross is still, I'm not lessening the cross, it will always

be our logo because you gaze upon the crucified long enough and sweet hearted enough, and you'll get the message. This is who God is. So it's almost the complete opposite of a punitive god.

Our capacity for missing the point is just so sad. And for completely missing the point, not knowing we're doing that, I know nobody was malicious. But, anyway, just very quickly, we, in that great debate, we lost the debate. The Dominicans were the dominant position, but we were called in the 13th century, like our supreme court does, the "Minority Position," all right? But the only seminaries this was taught in was Franciscan seminaries. Every other—Jesuits, they all studied the Dominican position. But we never got as rabid about it or as literal about it, because at least scholars knew there was the Franciscan Opinion.

Richard Rohr: Because, whereas the good Protestants when they came along thinking they were reforming the Catholic Church in this regard and several others, they just accepted the mainline Catholic position as dogma; as dogma; as absolute.

So, there's the very quick history, yeah. But now what is commonly being referred to now, what we call the Franciscan Opinion, they'll call the non-violent theory of atonement. The non-violent, because that's no small point: If God is violent, if there is such a thing as good violence, then there's such a thing as good violence. Can you imagine? Well, of course, you can, the implications through all of history. There is such a thing as good violence, it just messed up our whole message.

Brie Stoner: It's incredible to think about how one person could have such an impact on the whole trajectory, but I find that your referencing and giving us kind of a little tour de force of the history of all of this really helpful to remember the role that human beings have had on the entire scope of how we interpret our scriptures, or how we interpret our faith, or how we think about God. So, it kind of, for me, it humanized it, re-humanized the scope of Christianity. And I remember finding out that Anselm was in the time of the feudal system.

Richard Rohr: That's right, yes.

Brie Stoner: And so, he kind of contextualized—

Richard Rohr: That's the frame.

Brie Stoner: --feudalism as, "Oh, okay, well this works. Let's just put God into this box."

Richard Rohr: The feudal lord has to be paid off. It's the only world they knew.

Brie Stoner: Exactly, yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes.

Brie Stoner: But the violence that that creates in setting us up to believe in that structure as real. So you talk about the emphasis then of restorative justice as healing the split; reconnecting. It's about connectivity and relationship. It's not about right or fair, being right or fair. It's not about tit for tat, as you were saying. It's about a different emphasis of love and relationship. And that one parable that Jesus uses of the vineyard workers had always puzzled me.

Richard Rohr: Which one?

Brie Stoner: The one where he's got his vineyard workers and he pays them all the same amount.

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah.

Brie Stoner: My brain could barely handle that. It's like, "What?"

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah. Capitalists hate that. They'll walk out of the church.

Brie Stoner: Right? Within the context of how you're teaching this other perspective on the cross, it makes so much more sense.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Doesn't it; doesn't it. You've got to stop counting to understand the gospel. You've got to stop weighing and measuring. And we're all trained to do that more than ever by our capitalistic worldview. And we don't realize that's an ideology, that's an ism that we accept uncritically, and you know what I'm going to say, anything accepted uncritically as too big to fail will soon be demonic. It will be. Everything has to, except God Himself, Herself, is subject to critique. Everything, no exceptions—the Church, the papacy, the Bible. And you didn't want to critique the Bible; we didn't want to critique the papacy, the same idolatry in both cases.

Paul Swanson: In thinking through and holding that non-violent atonement theory approach, Jesus completely upends the power dynamic that is held in the substitutionary approach or theory, I should say. And we're much more comfortable with that, because it's easy to understand and relate to, that that tit-for-tat mentality is just so much of the waters we swim in, especially with our—

Richard Rohr: It really is.

Paul Swanson: --our capitalist transactions.

Richard Rohr: It's almost the only game in town.

Paul Swanson: Right; right. And so, how did Jesus in this non-violent approach change our relationship to God, of how we relate to God, and how God relates to us?

Richard Rohr: Well, the first thing comes to mind is His love, acceptance, and forgiveness of the outsider, the non-conformist, the non-Jew, the leper, the sinner, the prostitute. These were all people who didn't play the quid pro quo game, or they lost at it, put it that way. Even handicapped people were assumed to be sinners. I know the categories were pretty clear of who was saved in their language of saved, and who wasn't. That He would not just ignore that but flaunt that in daily practice, was meant to undo this measuring, weighing things up and down, in and out, right or wrong. His ignoring of most of the 613 laws of Judaism. I don't think people get His radicality. Well, of course, we didn't respect Judaism, so we didn't know that was their teaching. You have to respect Judaism and know a bit about it to know how scandalous and shocking Jesus is. And why? I mean, I'm sure if I'd been alive, I would have been a good Pharisee. I would have opposed Jesus, I think.

Richard Rohr: Because, you know, to use our language today, He comes from a model of abundance, and most of us are formed with a worldview of scarcity. There's not enough health care to go around; there's not enough housing to go around. It's always a model of scarcity. You see this particularly in one political party in our country, which I will not name. There's never enough, you know, except for war, there's always plenty. Isn't this interesting? And we're against deficits, but not now because this money we're spending on the rich, and the tax cuts are for the rich. So, suddenly we don't care about deficits anymore. It's so clear their whole worldview is scarcity, but in favor of power, and money, and war. That people don't spot that just astounds me. But when I see they didn't spot it in the gospel, no wonder they can't spot it in their politics, either.

Now I'm not saying that the other political party always operates from a worldview of abundance, but they're certainly a little more in that direction. But they would still be caught up in white privilege and smart, educated, white people are probably better, you know. So, neither of us are the gospel by any means. But the idea of real abundance, infinite God, infinite mercy, infinite compassion, I'm told that the concept of infinity is unthinkable by the human mind. So it's not even fully our fault. Unless you've had an experience of absolute radical grace, the name of our first magazine, you can't form the concept. You can't. So, you have to have once been loved when you didn't deserve it. The deserve game has to fall apart for you. It has to. The worthiness game has to fall apart for you. You tried as hard as you could to be worthy, and you still weren't, and someone loved you anyway. But if you've spent all your life obeying the laws, you really think, I know I did as a young boy, that my perfection as a good "one" was earning me God's love. It was working for a long time.

Brie Stoner: This is touching on such a tender spot in me because I think I still very much operate that way. Like deep down, if I'm—

Richard Rohr: We all go back to it.

Brie Stoner: Yeah. --if I'm honest, I still think I have to earn mine.

Richard Rohr: Yes, yes. The concept takes your whole life to sink in. You're absolutely right. I still do too. I preach it better than I live it. I still believe I deserve failure. I have a lot of success guilt, because I know I don't deserve it. It never stops. This is why we have to pray each day, to collapse into the ocean of mercy and learn how to rest there. Rest. I'm still learning, I'll tell you.

Brie Stoner: Well, you say in chapter 11 that you don't think Christians even realize the danger of the substitutionary atonement theory.

Richard Rohr: No, they don't.

Brie Stoner: And what we're sharing is just one side effect of that. And I wonder, what does seeing humanity as problematic breed? How does that breed problematic behavior?

Richard Rohr: Oh, yeah. Oh, very good. Well, I'm going to get back to a line I use too often: A good theology doesn't cancel out a bad anthropology, all right? And if human nature is basically sinners in the hands of an angry god, that human nature itself is not wounded but radically unworthy, you've dug a pit so deep normally you can't get out of it. It's just forever, "Could

this really be true that I'm objectively a child of God?" Now that's why that distinction between image and likeness is so helpful. Because what the normal person says, "Well, she isn't a very nice person, why am I to believe that she's in Christ?" So I said, "Oh, I admit on the level of likeness, she isn't doing too well right now, you understand, but the lack of likeness does not cancel out image." Imago Dei is objective, universal, everywhere. Hitler had the image of God. Benito Mussolini had the image of God. Nothing about likeness, I admit. But once you know there's a definitive--Paul uses the words "stamp" and "seal." You're stamped with it; you're sealed with it, then it's nothing human nature can play with anymore. And as you've heard me say to the Living School students, we can't allow human beings to decide who has the image of God and who doesn't. We've seen it fail in every country, in every culture. We will always decide who has it and who doesn't.

You know, there are books now listing the provable genocides in human history. Maybe the Holocaust was the biggest one. And did you watch that show on hate the other night? I mean, in the country and, of course, I guess I can say it since I'm German, but anti-Semitism and neo Nazis are on serious rise in Germany! What is it going to take; what they did to the world, you know? And forty years, no, fifty years later, apparently there's a segment of the young German population that believes it was a myth, it wasn't really true, they are a superior race, and the Jews are their problem. Oh God, it's just heartbreaking, heartbreaking.

So, we see the scapegoat mechanism. I mean, this is why I'm such a fan of René Girard, when he says he believes scapegoating is the mechanism that forms almost all cultures. When you first hear it, you think it's an overstatement. But then you go through history. There's never a group that doesn't hate another group. And now you know that we've been freed from that, now when we sing at Easter, "Christ has overcome death," oh my god, there's a sociological meaning to that. It's not just some theological abstraction.

You and I don't have to play the scapegoating game anymore, because we've seen through it by reason of the cross, that the most perfect man was murdered by religious people—that tells you how wrong religion can be—and by political people, the Roman empire, which shows you how wrong politics, and nationality, and ethnicity can be. Is that what you asked me about?

Paul Swanson: You took us right where we were going.

Richard Rohr: Oh, good, good.

Paul Swanson: That's fantastic, yeah.

Richard Rohr: Good, I hope so.

Paul Swanson: We're so grateful that you're bring up René Girard and the scapegoat mechanism, because it's just so rampant in our culture. We see it everywhere, and I think you just beautifully unpacked that. So, I'm just going to kind of jump ahead to another question here regarding the term "collision of opposites," and you said Jesus embodies that. And can you unpack what that phrase means because of it beginning, and why you see that as a universal pattern?

Richard Rohr: The phrase itself, the ones I'm most aware of that used it, were Nicholas of Cusa and

Bonaventure. And then in the modern era Carl Young, who psychologized the whole thing that they'd seen at a mythic, metaphysical level. So, I see it as you well know, as the very geometric shape of our logo. So this is no accident that the cross became our logo, and what is it? A vertical line being transgressed by a horizontal line there. They're cutting one another. And there Jesus hangs on this geometric image of opposite energies, opposite movements, if you don't mind me talking that language. But then it fits. Here He is, hanging between heaven and earth, between the symbolic spiritual and the symbolic physical. Why are there two thieves on both side of Him? The "good" thief and the "bad" thief, goodness and badness. Oh, God, it's so brilliant. I mean, you couldn't have created something better. Then as I always say, clearly a male body that would have been naked and shamed, and yet a most feminine disposition, a most feminine vulnerable soul.

It's just, those are the contradictions that we die on. Gender, nationality, judgment of good and bad, spiritual and material. So, Jesus dies, Bonaventure says on the collision of opposites. That's not an exact quote, but it's in all of his thinking. Now, whenever you try to hold the tension where you don't, as it were, choose sides between today what we call the liberals and the conservatives, but you can say, "Hey, the liberals are maintaining a very essential value of change and reform. You know, the conservatives are holding a very essential value of authority and continuity," when they can kiss, but when you try to make those two kiss, if I can use that word, you will be crucified. You will be. You please neither side. The liberals will say you're not a true liberal. The conservatives will say you're not a true conservative, and you can apply that to issue after issue after issue. We create false dichotomies. So this gets us into our dualistic thinking. And we think because we chose one between two choices—

You know, let's bring it home to American politics today. Is there no choice between building a wall and total amnesty? And we present, oh, no, cheering from the crowd, yelling for one, "Build that wall! Build that wall!" "Are you saying we should offer total amnesty?" There are twenty-five conversations in between those two extremes. We don't even know how to have them anymore.

Richard Rohr: All we do is shout back and forth, you know, build that wall or total amnesty. That's dualistic thinking. That's how you're crucified on such dualism while not even knowing you're being crucified, because it makes you hateful, it makes you angry, makes you violent, makes you righteous, when you totally identify with one side of the equation. It dominates politics today. And in countries not as maybe developed, it takes the form of culture wars, religious wars, tribal wars. Darn! The gospel really is the hope of the world, but we've got to get it beyond this saving-our-souls-to-go-to-heaven thing. It just doesn't create great people. It creates very small people; a security-oriented people, not big-hearted people.

Paul Swanson: And I hear you saying, too, it's not just a universal pattern, but there's a personal aspect to it as well where you will hold that anguish of the suffering as you're also trying to participate as a creative agent of love. And so, how do you see that embodiment whether it's your own life, about how you hold that collision of opposites as you have walked this path?

Richard Rohr: Let's say at the beginning, and be honest, this is the later stage. It takes a lot of refinement in your moment of suffering, or pain, to link your pain to the woman at the border with two children, to Jesus on the cross, to know, as I say in the book, it's one suffering. And to willingly say, "Okay, I can hold my part in love." This is not masochism, it's solidarity.

It's accompaniment. It's communion. I'm not saying we seek suffering, but knowing with certitude it's going to come to each of our lives, you'd better find a transcendent meaning for suffering, or you will do what most Americans do today: blame. You've got to project this inner fear of suffering and anxiety onto somebody, so it's the people of a different skin color, the people of a different religion, the people of a different social class. Oh, it never stops.

So, as you know I love to say, quoting a number of our saints who said it in different ways, Jesus is not loyal to any tribe. Jesus is not loyal to any group or war. When we're praying for the Lord to protect our troops, I often want to remind the people, you know, "He's protecting the troops on the other side too." They've never imagined that, or much less would they pray for that. But the cross means that Jesus, God's final loyalty, is to human suffering itself. Wherever there is pain, there is Jesus, which means, to make it very practical and this is hard to say, I'm not making a moral equivalence, that's not my point. Don't move it to the political level. But the heart of Jesus is weeping over the Taliban soldier just as much as the American infantryman, because they're both suffering in different ways. Now in terms of moral equation, I'm not making a judgment about that. I do believe one side is vicious, and that's their sadness that their heart is so cold and cruel. And Jesus weeps over that. And the other side is halfway, maybe a third way, fighting for a good cause. Really, they're holding down a job. But at least their cause is somewhat more noble.

So we've got to make that distinction, or we get into the false moral equivalence that we see Donald Trump representing in Charlottesville, "Well, there were good people on both sides," and I've got to say that very clearly, that we're not

Richard Rohr: saying that. That's why you've got to succeed at dualistic thinking, "No, this is moral. This is immoral." But the heart of God even loves, dammit, the immoral person, dammit. [laughter] We don't like that. So do you see why I say, this is the final stages of soul transformation. You can't expect that of the man on the street, and there's no point in hating him for it. But now when we see that it dominates our politics, it's getting very scary, the triumph of dualistic thinking at almost every level. No holding the collision of opposites, less and less ability from lawyers and college-educated people who are running our country, seem to be at an infantile level, spiritually.

Brie Stoner: That collision of opposites is such a point of tension and anguish, though. It's not easy to be in that space. And I think this touches on something we spoke of in an earlier episode about bodily-ness and physicality as a part of that process of being able to hold the tension. And then, oh, there it is. Richard just got up and pulled a book off the shelf of Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites. And I think what I'm experiencing in my life is that we talk a lot about dualism, and duality, and binary thinking, and that, hopefully, the contemplative path and this radical insight of seeing the Christ-soaked world invites us into a non-dual way of living. Sometimes I think non-duality has been painted as a very mental thing. When I—

Richard Rohr: That's very fair, yes.

Brie Stoner: I feel like it has a very embodied quality—

Richard Rohr: That's great.

Brie Stoner: --of being able to hold tension and anguish, and not collapse it. I almost can feel it in my

body right now. It's easier to collapse the tension.

Richard Rohr: Yes, it is.

Brie Stoner: It's easier to move to one side or the other than it actually is to be in that middle meeting point.

Richard Rohr: Or even to glibly say, "Oh, everything is beautiful." That's what you see in some superficial, sometimes called New Age thinking. I don't mean to put down the

Richard Rohr: New Age Movement, but the tragic realism of Christianity is that it doesn't say everything is beautiful immediately. It's only beautiful through the tragic, when the soul is refined and can still love and still forgive. So, that's our connection with social justice. So, it isn't just a mental game of, "Oh, yes, I think all things are okay." No, all things are marked with the cross. It's a much harder message. But it's utter realism; utter realism. And I hope I can hold it when it becomes utter un-realism for me, which is suffering. Yeah.

Brie Stoner: Speaking of suffering, in chapter 12, you share quite vulnerably about the loss of your dog Venus and hitting a tipping point of despair. And it's so refreshing and unusual to hear from a teacher of any stature that level of authenticity. I was especially impacted by your honesty in sharing how hard that was for you. And I wonder if you'd be willing to share a little bit about that time and especially what it was that shifted you kind of out of that great sadness that you talk about?

Richard Rohr: You know, I feel somewhat ashamed of feeling that because I think of parents who've lost children. And I know this isn't in the same ballpark, so let me say that to begin with. They say, and I'm sure both of you can imagine, you never get over it the rest of your life; the rest of your life. It isn't, however, the exact object of your love, it's the character of your relationship with that object that makes love, love. So, I admit Venus was just a dog, and she wasn't a human being. But having her for almost fifteen years daily presence when I was home, one who sought out my presence just like my mother delighted in when I entered the room, jumped with joy, there's not many human beings that are that reliable, even your own children. I mean, there were no exceptions to it.

If she had to choose, I remember there were times where I put her food down and then left the door. There's no doubt, she'd rather go with me than eat her food. That's just the most unconditional love. Why do you want to be with me so bad? I just do. Oh, God, their earnest little faces. Anybody who's had a dog knows that any object can elicit affection, the flow, as I call it in the Divine Dance book, and that's what matters is the flow. And I'm sure there are people who love their occupation, or their craft, or their art form. That elicits the flow. You're lucky enough to have two beautiful children that immediately elicit the flow at a partner. But it doesn't depend on that. You can, and I know in your lives you have other things that get you in the flow. So Venus did that for me, and that's why I dedicate the book to her even, and why I say at the risk of looking like a heretic or lightweight theology, I can say Venus for a certain period of my life, fifteen years, operated as Christ for me: one who mirrored unconditional acceptance; one who mirrored delight in me, and made me delight in her.

And I knew as she was getting old, I would just look over at her snuggled next to me, you

know, always wanted to sit by me if she could, and I'd say, I'm not going to have this much longer. I'd better enjoy it. But I didn't know how to enjoy it any more than I could. But I tried to stuff more in because I knew I'd probably never have a partner like that. So, I'm sure you do that with your partners. It was good. But yeah, her death was very, very sad, I walked around feeling empty for weeks to not have that mirror there. And I see why people who've never believed in eternal life after they lose a beloved, they start believing in it, because you just cannot believe that experience of love could die. There's something about true love is infinite, which is why I say great love and great suffering are the paths of transformation.

If you've never been in that flow of, "I would die for her," or "I would give my life for him," or-- I remember when she was lost once, maybe you remember that for about six weeks it was this, I just, "Oh, where is she tonight? What's she doing? Is she sleeping under a bridge? Is someone abusing her?" And she reappears in the yard. Vanessa sees her. She's all bedraggled. And then her excitement when she saw me. So, yeah, thank you for letting me talk about Venus. Now she's buried in my front yard. But, you know, there's a Franciscan who I knew, he now has dementia, wrote a book Will I See My Dog in Heaven? And he uses very good scriptures, very good theology, very good theology to say I think you have every reason to believe. Anything that is loved is eternal. And to deny that that's the nature of love would just be foolish. Thank you.

Brie Stoner: What was it in the midst of that time of sadness and despair, what helped you tip out of that, or did you? I'm curious as we reflect on suffering and the experience of the collision of opposites and embracing it as part of this life. What helped you move through?

Richard Rohr: There is no doubt, of course, it happened at a time where there was so much human suffering in the world, maybe there always has been. But I would try to think of a refugee woman. I think Syria was happening, these women running with their children, just to say, "My sadness doesn't approach hers, and so I choose it if it's choosing her too." Do you understand?

Paul Swanson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Rohr: So, it created a wonderful sadness, I mean wonderful solidarity. It wasn't a wonderful sadness. Then when I read William Paul Young's book The Shack, and he talked about the "one sadness." No, he talked about the "great sadness within," yeah. I talked about the "one sadness" in the book, that this is all something that melds us together. When you think you're the only one, frankly you get into self-pity, which is very maudlin and narcissistic. And if you stay there with just, "It isn't fair. It isn't fair. Why should this happen to me. Am I the only person that ever lost a dog?" And I think, how many people all over the world, you know, have lost their pet dogs—little boys in Thailand—and now I'm connected to all of them by suffering. It's just wonderful that suffering has the power to connect you, just like love does. And now with a heart softened, and a lot of them can make you overly special for a while, but suffering doesn't make you feel special, it makes you feel un-special and that's, for some reason, a deeper solidarity.

We call this grief work. And it is work, and it's a feeling of loss, unfairness, finality. It's a unique emotion that reconnects you at a whole deeper level than you've ever been connected before. You can't even understand it until you've gone through it. I got the first chance of it

at the loss of both my mother and my father. I remember months after, just counting the days even, when she died on January 3, now it's February 3. It was almost like time had changed. And things that upset me before, I didn't have time to be upset by them, because Mother is gone forever. How can that be? It's just, your mind doesn't allow that something that existed, doesn't exist. So, that's the unique emotion of grief that is certainly

Richard Rohr: one of the greatest, if not a necessary, teacher of the soul. You have to go through it in one form or another, or there's a whole bunch of things you don't know, and you haven't felt. And it has to hurt. It has to feel like absurdity, tragedy, unfairness, "Why me?" The ego will try every little game it can to reclaim control. And you've heard me define suffering as whenever you're not in control. And boy, there's nothing that leaves you out of final control than the eternal death of another person who you once loved, because death seems eternal. "I will never see them again."

Oh, can you imagine how many people in the world live, depressed people, because they have no spirituality, to "Why was my son killed in war," or whatever it might me. If it doesn't universalize you, it fills you with resentment and self-pity. Self-pity is something that really traps you in your narcissism. And you almost have to feel it for a while to say, "I want out of this." I'm tired of feeling sorry for myself. And the way out of that cage is to recognize, "You know what, everybody else has felt the same thing. I'm not the first one." That universalizes the emotion and gives you sympathy, empathy, for the little poor woman who has no friends, or whatever it might be. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: And in that passage on Venus, you speak to that univisation of suffering, and you incorporate in that gaze of seeing the one suffering of Venus, how that's a part of the one suffering of God.

Richard Rohr: Of God.

Paul Swanson: I think that notion of a God who suffers can be hard for a lot of people to take on and to really feel to be true. How do you relate to the suffering God? How does God suffer?

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Forgive me for always being so theological, but this is the price we paid for not being Trinitarian. We almost all of us have a notion of "almighty God." It's revealed in our church prayers, even in our private prayers, "almighty God" we begin our prayers with. We didn't see that God was equally outpouring, which is the almighty part, but to be outpouring, He had to be also self-emptying. I don't know if I've ever heard an official prayer of the church that begins, "All Vulnerable God; All Suffering God; All Self-emptying God," you know. Without trinity, everything gets corrupted because we don't get the nature of God right. So, in fact, somewhere, 10th, 11th century, what was called, you've probably never heard the word "patripassianism." Have you heard that?

Paul Swanson: No.

Richard Rohr: You can figure it out from your Spanish: the father suffering; patripassianism. That was condemned as a heresy. You may not say the Father suffers, you know. Well, if Jesus is the image of the invisible God, what is the message? God is suffering love. The Father does suffer. Look it up in a theological dictionary. I'm

Richard Rohr: pretty sure it was condemned as a heresy. You may not say that God suffers. We lost another basis for mysticism, that the crucified body of Jesus on the cross is a statement about the universal attitude of God toward reality that He's suffering with us and in us, not just for us. We limited it to the one preposition, Jesus suffering for us. But the idea of Jesus suffering in us and with us, that makes it much deeper. You can have four, that works, but when it's only four, it's transactional again. When it's in and with, it's transformational. And it gives you a capacity to hold your own suffering, because you can really say as vain glorious as this sounds, that, "My suffering is a participation in the suffering of God." Oh my god. Now I don't resist it so much.

I quote these three wonderful Jewish women who are outstanding examples, and I point out they were Jewish: Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum, Simone Weil. In each of their writings, again note the femininity, they ask that they can help God a little bit. Etty Hillesum is just, "Let me do my little part to help you out, God. I know you're bearing this suffering." Can you imagine what a high level of mysticism that is? Asking, can I help God? I mean, we spend all our prayers, "God help me." And each in their own way, all three of them do it: Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum, and Simone Weil. It's phenomenal.

Brie Stoner: I so appreciate you bringing up that feminine perspective because as I'm listening to you talk about the Trinity and self-emptying, what comes to mind for me is childbirth, the anguish, the pain, and the physicality of it.

Richard Rohr: Oh, I'll bet. I'll bet.

Brie Stoner: And if this is how life comes to be, why are we so resistant then to it? It's almost like we've tried to disembody ourselves from bodily-ness to even know this. I remember once I was going for a walk in the middle of a really foggy morning. And I turned a corner and all of a sudden there was this branch of a pine tree. And I don't know what it was about that moment, but the sharpness of the line of the pine needle, and I'm just staring at it and I thought, "I don't know what it costs to grow a pine needle." Why do we assume that everything that is living and is beautiful emerges without suffering, when everything in our experience actually teaches us that suffering is the creative way? And I'm not saying that as a like, oh, let's just indulge being—

Richard Rohr: Oh, I know. I know.

Brie Stoner: I'm saying the friction. There's something about creativity and life that goes through the eye of the needle of a certain amount of tension and friction. And it's almost as if we've completely denied that aspect of it. So, when I hear you talk about the suffering of God, what comes to my mind is evolution itself, this whole creative enterprise.

Richard Rohr: Yes, perfect. Perfect. Yes. You know, I've seen it when I used to travel in developing countries a lot more, how the poor, they aren't surprised by

Richard Rohr: inconvenience. They expect it. They aren't surprised by discomfort. And I just feel like such an idiot in their presence. I mean, I would say as an American, those are two of my greatest idols—comfort and convenience, because I've had them all my life. I know what a nice chair feels like, you know, and I don't want to be in an uncomfortable chair. You see why they have such a head start in the spiritual life, people who don't expect that. People who have

been raised where everything worked for them, then a little inconvenience or critique comes into their life, this is America right now. And they feel oppressed. I mean, white rich men are feeling oppressed. It's just, "Do you realize what life you've had?" But it feels like that to them because everything has just been "Jim Dandy" for forty-five years. "The world has been my oyster." So, it leaves us at a tremendous disadvantage.

You know, when we call it a politics of grievance, a politics of victimhood, everybody's out to prove how they've been victimized. And this ties us up with the scapegoat. What I always say, what Jesus does on the cross is He does the victim thing right. We play the victim for our own self-aggrandizement, picture white politicians in Washington, you know, who just are being persecuted and misunderstood so much, you know. Or, we make victims of other people. Jesus does neither. He neither plays the victim nor creates victims. That is liberation first of all from the self, that He doesn't need to do that. God, if we'd just learn that. Because, I mean, if there's one underlying pattern in America today, it's everybody trying to prove they didn't get what they deserved. I didn't get what I had a right to. Where did this right come from? Just because you're used to it. You're used to comfort, you're used to luxury. Now that I got to live at one step lower of luxury, it's unjust!

Oh my god. In the great scheme of things it's all so silly and sad. And that must be part of the sadness of God, to see that His children remain such infants and have such little solidarity with the pain of other people.

Paul Swanson: That entitlement comes right from our individualized society.

Richard Rohr: Yes. Yes.

Paul Swanson: And from what we can tell from our own Christian biblical text is that God is about saving a collective, about the whole cosmos. So, what gifts of understanding of ourselves as a part of this whole body, or as you say this one lump, what are we missing out on when we individualize that much or feel entitled to having our own big piece of the pie?

Richard Rohr: We neither understand salvation nor suffering. You've heard me use those two phrases from Paul, "the weight of glory and the burden of sin," and you've heard me say, forgive me for repeating, but both of those are too big a mystery to be burdened or carried by the individual. The weight of glory to, for me to imagine that I, Richard, when I see all my faults and the glory of God, but once I can say, "We are the glory of God, and that I have a little piece of it," I don't

Richard Rohr: deny that. I have a charism, a gift, I'm at peace, but I don't need to be burdened with being perfect anymore. We are the glory of God. Wow. That's a huge burden off your back.

And then the self-pity thing, when I think I'm the only one who's ever had to suffer this much, I'm the only one who doesn't get my way. No, we are the suffering of God. And if I can choose to do this with patience and trust, I'll talk on a quid pro quo way but it's the only way, if in some metaphysical, mystical way, my saying "yes" to this is helping this Syrian woman in a refugee camp, if I in any way can, I'll do it. I can do it. I've got a meaning for doing it. That has helped many people survive, knowing they're doing it for God or for someone else. And anything you do for God, it's the same thing, it's done for everybody else.

So, yeah, by individualizing the gospel, we took away its power to heal and its power to save, because the individual can't carry that. If you're going to heaven alone, you're not going to heaven. And if you could be excited in heaven, if I'm not there, well who are you? Do you understand, where you could take delight that those Hindus are all burning in hell for all of eternity? Well, you're not in heaven. That moment that you could be satisfied thinking anybody is being tortured by God, in fact, you'd stop trusting God, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you go out and say, "God, stop torturing him, please." It's just, the whole thing is unbelievable unless it's a solidarity in salvation and a solidarity in suffering, yeah.

Paul Swanson: So, Richard, we need to close this week. Where have you experienced suffering with or in Christ?

Richard Rohr: This week?

Paul Swanson: This past week, yeah. Besides that dog barking out—

Richard Rohr: The dog.

Paul Swanson: Our constant companion.

Richard Rohr: I haven't suffered much this week. I'll tell you as new little things keep happening to my body, like tomorrow I have to go and get this cancer, you can't even see it right now, thank God, but I have to go and have it cut out. I can feel myself keep slipping into self-pity, "Shoot," I said a nice word there. [laughter]

Brie Stoner: That's not what you really said, Richard.

Richard Rohr: That's not what I was thinking. It's like, "How many things have to go wrong with my body?" And then I think, "I got my blood work back and they said 'your sugar is too high.'" I said, "Does that mean now I'm going to be a diabetic?" "Well, it's possible." Oh, it's just the heart attack, cancer. I don't think I'm going

Richard Rohr: to be a diabetic, I don't know. Yeah, I was slipping into self-pity several times. Like, "Is this what old age is like, just every week discovering a new faulty part of your body?"

So, I get, "Now, did I connect my little bit of self-pity? Did I? Be honest, Richard. I don't know if I did it. Did I connect it with anybody else's?" No, I can't say I sunk into self-pity, a funk, I didn't, no. But it was sure a temptation. And I'm sure at some level the reason I didn't sink into it is because I know this is the human situation, join the club, Richard. Millions of people have gotten old before you. Can't you accept your little journey with these diseases? So I guess that's it, yeah. Thank you.

[music playing]

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Thank you.

Brie Stoner: The beautiful music you're listening to is provided by Birdtalker. Another Name for Every

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