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A Suffering Servant's Concern for Suffering Servants
(A study on the life of August Pieper)

Elwood Fromm

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A Suffering Servant's Concern for Suffering Servants

The first time I heard the name of August Pieper was at my mother's knee. I remember her speaking of him, and that very endearing-ly, as her childhood pastor at St. Markus Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. Later on I recall her saying either that she received baptism or confirmation from him. Since he arrived at St Marcus in 1891, baptism is the probability. Or else my mother was confirmed when she was only twelve, since Pastor Pieper left Marcus in 1902.

At any rate, I like to think that it was under his care that she learned to deeply love the 23rd Psalm, a psalm she lived by, and died by. It was our last prayer together.

A photograph of an interior view of St. Marcus in the days when Rev. Pieper served there lies before me. Since then the balcony, benches, and pulpit have changed a great deal. But the altar which stood there in my childhood days, the late '20s and early '30s, is the same. And the picture over it, standing altogether some 15 feet high, is that of the Christ of Gethsemane, God's Suffering Servant Supreme. Under this striking picture August Pieper for 12 years led Jesus' Flock in worship of this Suffering Servant.

The Holy Spirit called Pastor Peiper to the Wauwatosa Seminary in 1902. St. Marcus' Golden Anniversary Booklet describes the change thus. "In August 1902 Pastor Pieper received a call to a professorship at our Seminary in Wauwatosa. Only because a certain physical ailment made it impossible for him properly to discharge his ministerial duties, while it would not hinder him in the performance of his duties at the seminary, did the congregation grant him a release. Thus, however, Synod gained a teacher whose gifts and abilities

are of the highest order."¹

Pastor Pieper was apparently an outstanding congregational pastor, and preacher of God's grace. The latter especially has been substantiated from the words of those who heard him preach. And exploring this phase of his ministry would have I'm sure, yielded rich rewards. Or one could have gone into his career as a professor at the Seminary. Forty one years of classroom teaching - just the length alone is staggering, not to mention what all went into that teaching, -the content, his manner and technique, his relationship to the students. Or what about August Pieper as a theologian and scholar, or as a defender of Confessional Lutheranism, or as a writer? He probably wouldn't have liked to be called a scholar, but that indeed he was, in the best sense of the term. Or what about his role in the Protestant Controversy? I sort of sense he should have a strong defender here. And what about August Pieper as a family man? Interviewing a few of his "grand-relatives", we found a deep love and respect, you might say, far beyond the "ordinary".

But we choose to more or less by-pass these somewhat obvious areas of Rev. Pieper's life for an area of concern less obvious, and that is his deep concern, as our title indicates, for God's suffering servants. We hope to show that this concern was exceptional, and that as one suffering servant of Jesus, our Great Suffering Servant, he brought, and still brings in richest measure to Christ's suffering servants, comfort and hope.

What led us to make this choice? Undoubtedly it was his excellent work, "the Book of Job in its Significance for Preaching and the Care of Souls." Fortunately for me, this came out in translation in 1977. Recalling what I had read on the subject the last couple years, I just couldn't help feel there was no comparison. Here was someone who had finally hit the nail on the head. Here was

¹St Markus Lutheran Church, Zum Goldenen Jubilaeum der St. Markus Gemeinde 1875-1975, p. 30

someone who wiped away the cobwebs, and clarified what the book of Job was all about. And if a man could do that, the Holy Spirit had really given him a deep understanding of human suffering.

I don't think Professor Pieper intentionally devoted himself to the subject of suffering as such. But that there was a certain devotion to the topic no one will deny. To my knowledge, his 2 most extensive works, that on the book of Job, and the Commentary on the last 27 chapters of Isaiah, center in God's suffering servants, Job and the Lord Jesus Christ. And notice the way he closes his study of the book of Job. "No pastor can afford not to study this book again and again in order to improve his ministry to the sick."² Pastor and Professor Pieper is, by his own words, a man who studied Job, "again and again".

Nor was his devotion to the subject of affliction a mere scholarly one, as seems to happen so often in the case of Job "experts".² In his introduction to the Job explanation he writes, "But, of course, we are not interested in abstract, merely scholarly Scripture study, in heaping up Scriptural knowledge for the sake of knowledge. No, salvation, eternal life--that is what we seek from Scripture! divine wisdom for our knowledge, divine comfort for our faith, divine power for our calling and for the battle appointed us, for the office entrusted to us. That purpose also the following study of the book of Job is to serve."³

And we can add here that Professor Pieper not only preached concern, but lived that concern for the afflicted. Relatives inform us that was instrumental in founding the Lutheran Children's Friend's Society in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. They also inform us that he served on a delegation to Europe to relieve suffering after World War I. And

²Pieper, August, The Book of Job in its Significance for Preaching and the Care of Souls, (Mequon, Wis., Seminary Mimeo Co., Wisconsin Luth. Seminary)p.32

³Ibid, p.1

his students tell us of an excellent exegesis of Psalm 90, presented to a class just after having come from a death bed ministrations. These are some of the more obvious examples of his warm heart and hand for the afflicted. But what about those examples that have never been recorded in memories or on paper? From what we read in his Job commentary, from the warm heart for the afflicted recorded there, we judge they must have been many.

Returning to the fact that Professor Pieper wrote major works on the second part of Isaiah and on Job, -I find this especially intriguing for our subject. Man cannot, of course, even begin to understand human suffering until he is able to comprehend in faith the suffering of God's Servant of Calvary. What floundering must occur when human pain is divorced from the pain of its Lord, when human death is interpreted apart the Savior's death. But such was not August Pieper's dilemma. He knew his Lord's suffering, perhaps as well as any man will ever understand that suffering. And he trusted deeply in that suffering Lord. And one reason he knew and trusted so deeply was that God had made him a theologian of first rank of the Old Testament, especially of the book of Isaiah. His Hebrew was apparently great. His exegetical ability was apparently excellent. And his heart was in the right place, as we have shown in a previous paragraph. If any man could speak with confidence on the subject of the suffering Servant Who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, he could. If any man could comfort and comfort some more God's suffering servants, it was Professor Pieper.

No wonder, then, he was able to penetrate into the problems of the book of Job in such depth. No wonder then, that he is able to explain so clearly the characters involved, -their significance in the book, their motives, their interpretation of events. And no wonder

he does such a good job of explaining God's purposes in dealing as He did with Job. Yes, Professor Pieper understood Job's suffering so well because he understood Christ's suffering so well. And he was deeply concerned about human suffering because he was first of all deeply concerned about Christ's suffering.

We might now ask whether there was anything special in August Pieper's life beyond the fact that he was a pastor and then professor interested in comforting the wounded in body and heart, that led him to have a special concern for the afflicted. There apparently were a number of events which could easily be interpreted as bringing this about. Call it affliction if you will, August was raised in a family of 8 children and was the 5th of 6 brothers, and his autobiographical notes/^{record}the strain of being a younger brother. But a twelve year old boy's heart must have really been crushed when his father died in 1869. That's an especially rough time for a boy to loose his dad. Then came the decision of mother Pieper to emigrate to America the next year, and while August must have been as adventure loving as any 13 year old boy, there was still a culture shock which throws anybody moving from one land to another. The trip across gave the Pieper family a couple of scares. First, trouble threatening on board made it necessary for ship's officers to carry loaded revolvers and drawn swords.. And then there was a severe storm which put the ship out of commission and caused it to "spin around continually."

Seminary days in St. Louis saw August face one of the severest trials in his life. He and 5 or 6 other students developed typhoid fever from drinking infected water. He himself reports that he "raved like a wild man", and that brother Franz even stated, "Oh, if he is not to regain his health, I wish that he would die now." In his delirium, he himself felt condemned by God forever. So

apparently death was a distinct possibility. But August remembers that in the midst of his anguish and fears, God brought him a comforter in a Professor Shaller, who encouraged him with the words of Ps. 118:17,18. And he recalls that it was from that moment that he began to mend. A loss of his hair also added to the distress, as well as a temporary memory loss. I would say that this experience in August Pieper's life, more than any other, influenced his concern for and understanding of human suffering.

Another hard cross to bear must have been the throat ailment with which Pastor Pieper was afflicted in the 2nd parish he served. He describes himself as laboring "under great strain for five years", finally losing his voice completely. What a blow that must have been for Christ's preaching servant. Texas air seems to have helped, but is it this throat problem again which caused him to leave St. Markus, and to accept the Seminary call? I'm sure these anguished years must also be reflected in his Job commentary. Two other crosses we feel compelled to mention, although they would not have had an effect on his work on Job, are the death of his wife Emma some 17 years before his departure, in 1946, and the death of his 2nd youngest daughter, Lydia Stern, six years before Emma's.

I think there can be little doubt that August Pieper was a man of the cross, most certainly that of his Savior, but also that of human affliction borne in his own body and soul. And being a man of the cross, he was a man also deeply concerned with the spiritual and physical crosses borne by his fellowmen. That concern was reflected in his ministry during his years as a pastor, and in his various activities on behalf of the afflicted. And I'm sure investigation would reveal such concern in his life at the seminary during his many years there. But as a good steward of the talents God gave him, Professor Pieper saw that he could best help men in

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their affliction by devoting those talents to his theological studies, especially in such books as Isaiah and Job, and then conveying the results of those studies to his students. And then in turn those students, by God's grace, could convey those results to Christ's flocks scattered throughout the world.

And is this not exactly what happened? Today have not countless thousands of Christ's suffering servants been comforted by pastors August Pieper helped train as comforters? And will not countless thousands more in this and future generations find true guidance and consolation in affliction as a result of his concern for the suffering? Then let the Church praise God and His Grace for providing such a devoted servant.

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