

Sharing the Suffering
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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5/4/08

1 Peter 4:12-14 (NASB)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; [13] but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. [14] If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

1 Peter 5:6-11 (NASB)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, [7] casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. [8] Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. [9] But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. [10] And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. [11] To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

DISCLAIMERS

I'm intrigued by the advertisements for prescription medication that we see on TV. No matter what the malady that the medicine is supposed to treat we see smiling people. They are obviously quite satisfied with their life because now they take a little purple pill on a regular basis.

But, as the music plays softly in the background and the children play with the dog and the couple holds hands, the announcer begins to talk about side effects.

Even the idyllic setting cannot draw your attention from the disclaimer. "By the way, this happens very rarely, but if you happen to lose your eyesight or your hearing starts to go or your hair starts falling out, please see your physician as quickly as possible."

You think?

Why these drug companies pay for these commercials I'll never know. First, I think it's up to my physician to tell me if I need a little purple pill. And second, if he did tell me that I needed that little purple pill, I might not want to after hearing about the side effects.

Even the best medicines come with disclaimers. Whether a particular medication is good for you depends upon your medical history, test results, and your physician's judgment as to what shows the most promise in your particular case.

I sometimes think that sermons should come with disclaimers too. Sermons should have the same kind of warnings that we put on strong medicines. How you should apply this message depends upon your particular circumstance and the circumstances that were a part of the original message.

Yanking a passage out of context is as dangerous to your spiritual health as taking a prescription medication without a prescription. And that's especially true when it comes to passages dealing with persecution and suffering.

I've heard more bad sermons on suffering than on any other topic. "Time heals all wounds. What doesn't kill you will make you stronger."

Are you kidding me? Suffering is not good for you. It's not like some kind of spiritual aerobics that will build you up. Suffering is suffering.

Suffering is to be avoided at all costs. If you were to ask me today, "Pastor, would you like to suffer for Jesus today?" I would reply, "No thanks. I'll wait on that until tomorrow!"

Like the proper use of prescription medication the Christians response to suffering is a complex topic. You cannot express it fully in a television sound bite. There are a lot of ifs, ands, and buts when it comes to suffering. One prescription does not fit all.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

And yet we certainly cannot avoid the topic either. The cross of Christ, a cross of real suffering stands at the heart of the Christian faith. We can remove the symbol from our sanctuaries, but we cannot remove it from the gospel message.

How does that "old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame" as the gospel hymn puts it become something that we can love? How can the cross be a source of hope and comfort when we confront suffering?

Well, first of all when we look at what the Bible has to say about suffering, we have to realize that the kind of suffering the Bible talks about is not always the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or the suffering that comes to us as a part of being mortal.

The suffering the Bible talks about is often cruciform in shape.

By that I mean that suffering in the Bible often comes about because Jesus or the followers of Jesus are being persecuted for what they are saying about the kingdom of God. Jesus told his disciples that they were to expect persecution. To follow Jesus meant to take up a cross, and for those early Christians it was literally true.

Most of us know the story about how Nero burned Rome in 64 AD and then blamed the Christians. Tacitus, the Roman historian tells us that those who confessed to being Christians after this were persecuted in the most horrible ways. They were covered in animal skins and attacked by dogs. They were nailed to crosses. They were set on fire, even burned at night for the illumination of Nero's garden parties.

When Peter talks about the "fiery ordeal" that is about to come upon the church, he is in some respects speaking quite literally. This is persecution with a capital "P". We do not experience this kind of persecution.

MODERN PERSECUTION

But, there are modern Christians even today who suffer for the gospel, who still experience the fiery ordeal. A Liberian pastor returned from study leave in America. He was met by local authorities at the airport and immediately placed in prison for the anticipated crime of proclaiming the gospel. In some countries it is illegal to be a Christian. Christians are hunted and killed by members of their own family.

One minister told of a trip to St. Petersburg, Russia where he got to know the granddaughter of the former pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church. Once a magnificent Gothic church, the Soviets took it over and stripped it bare.

They removed all the faith symbols, dug a huge hole in the floor, poured massive concrete bleachers around the sides, and erected a 30 meter diving platform. The church was converted into an Olympic diving pool.

And the pastor, his granddaughter remembered, was arrested at night and executed behind the church. The church officials were sent off to Siberia. Later when the Soviet Union fell apart the church was returned to the remnant of believers who went about the tremendous challenge of restoring their place of worship.

Now that is persecution. That is suffering for the gospel. No one has even threatened to shoot me because I've preached a sermon. (Well, at least not too many people.) None of my elders have ever spent any time in the slammer on charges of being too Christian. It would be a gross mishandling of this text and a dishonor to faith of the martyrs to suggest that the petty persecutions of our comfortable world are somehow equal to the persecutions that came to the church in Peter's day.

For the most part, we do not know what it means to be persecuted for the faith.

A REASON TO PERSECUTE

I thought the commentator; William Barclay had an interesting take on this. He said that the reason we aren't persecuted is that our faith is not clear and strong. Our message doesn't challenge the world and so the world leaves us alone.

We have accommodated the Christian faith to the culture. We have subconsciously tweaked the message of Jesus to the point that it is no longer the scandalous message of the cross.

This past Monday I watched the Rev. Jeremiah Wright perform at the National Press Club. Though I disagree with almost every word that comes out of his mouth when it comes to our country, he did give me an insight into why God's message often brought persecution to the prophets and to Jesus and his disciples.

Right after the attacks of 9/11 Pastor Wright said that we were being attacked because we had been unfaithful as a nation in the past. Our chickens were coming home to roost. Well that's exactly what Pastor Wright's namesake, Jeremiah the prophet preached to God's people.

But, nobody liked what Jeremiah the prophet had to say as the Babylonians stood poised to destroy their nation. Unlike the Rev. Wright they didn't reward him with a big home and a fine car. They threw him down a well that was dry ... almost dry. It was muddy at the bottom, and God's prophet found himself hip deep in the muck and mire.

No wonder Jeremiah protested so much when God called him to preach. Proclaiming God's word has always been a dangerous business.

When Jesus came preaching good news to the poor, release to the captive and a salvation that extended even to one's enemy, the folks in his home town of Nazareth didn't like that sermon. They tried to take him out of town and throw him off a cliff.
(Luke 4:13-30) And the same sort of thing happened to Jesus' disciples after his death and resurrection.

Persecution for the faith was not a surprise. It was expected. (1 Peter 4:12)

PERSECUTION AND JOY

We do not know persecution, but the Bible consistently states that persecution for the faith is in some sense a blessing. For example, in our lesson for today Peter suggests that the Christians of his day should rejoice when they share the sufferings of Christ. That phrase "sharing the suffering of Christ" is also used by the Apostle Paul.

What were they talking about? How can we share the suffering of Christ, and why would we ever want to do such a thing? Very few of us would agree with Peter when he says, "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." 1 Peter 4:14 (NASB)

Let someone else be blessed with that glory. We judge success not by how people revile us but by how many people embrace us. But, at least in the early church and in some places in the world today, proclaiming the gospel does not bring success. It brings persecution.

We live in a country where there is true freedom of religion. No one will persecute us for our religion unless in those rare cases we break some law or do something immoral in the guise of religious expression. By and large, Americans are a tolerant people.

But, this atmosphere of tolerance has in some ways made us unappreciative of our faith and what it has cost many people down through the years to maintain our faith. We have it too easy, and that often means that our faith is shallow.

I remember hosting a minister from Central America at the church I served in Virginia. I heard stories about how deprived the people were from a material standpoint, but I could not help but be impressed by the depth of their faith.

As the pastor and I looked over the small sanctuary that looked a lot like ours, he said, "I feel sorry for you who are pastors in America. The people have so much that it is hard to get them interested in spiritual things. My people struggle and they are ready to hear the gospel."

Somehow we have to learn to share in that struggle so that we can also see the glory. We have to learn to make this connection between sharing the suffering of others and sharing in the suffering of Christ. We have to learn that peculiar joy that comes when we give up everything for the love of the best thing.

We probably understand persecution and voluntary sacrifice better when it comes to our country than we do our faith. We understand how some people have given their lives in service to their country in the military.

We may disagree about what constitutes a just war or even if there is such a thing as a just war, but no one can doubt the devotion and sacrifice of those who paid the ultimate price for their country. No one can look at the rows of crosses at Arlington National Cemetery and not be overwhelmed by the tremendous sacrifice made by soldiers for this country.

Quite often when I do a funeral for a military veteran, even though that person served long ago, the family thinks it appropriate and in a way comforting to have some military component to the graveside service. Why is that so? Service that risks even life itself has a kind of nobility that continues.

PREPARING FOR PERSECUTION

Just as we train our people to love and serve our country in a greater way we should teach our people to love and serve their God. We should prepare to give the ultimate sacrifice for the faith even if we are not called upon to do so.

Some might even be shocked that I would say a thing like that. We have become so enamored with feel-good Christianity that the idea of giving our life for the faith seems like a foreign concept. Why would anyone want to be a part of an organization that might require us to make the ultimate sacrifice?

And yet we don't question that requirement when it comes to our country do we?

Hopefully, we will not experience persecution. But, how can we appreciate those who have sacrificed for the faith and become a part of their legacy?

There is a way. In fact, that's what our lesson for today is all about. Peter told the early church that they should not be "surprised" when persecution and suffering came upon them. They should be prepared for the ordeal.

So how do we do that? How do we prepare for persecution when we live in a society where "taking it easy" is the ultimate value and religions that require sacrifice are considered primitive?

SHARE THE SUFFERING

First, we need to find ways to share the suffering of Christ. Think about those places where Christians are suffering for their faith. This is where our mission work comes into play. We need to learn about what is going on and find ways to support our brothers and sisters who are undergoing persecution.

Our giving to mission support has gone down over the past few years. If we believed that it was our responsibility to share the suffering of fellow Christians the world over, perhaps we wouldn't be so cavalier about our support of mission.

More than that, I think that we would find that we would be blessed by our contact with those Christians in areas where persecution is a reality. They are quite willing to share their joy and a mature Christian faith that is a result of their commitment to the gospel.

But, sharing the suffering of Christ can also take place at home. When we voluntarily take on the suffering of others in the name of Christ, we prepare ourselves for greater service in the kingdom. I wrote in my e-mail this past week that our society talks about sharing the wealth. Christians talk about sharing the suffering. The Apostle Paul talked about "rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep." (Romans 12:15)

In other words, we are a community that shares the good times and the bad. We allow our hearts to be glad and we allow our hearts to be broken in the name of Christ. This is the polar opposite of a society that often values individualism and a "it's none of your business" attitude. We allow ourselves to become involved in the name of Christ ... and in so doing we share the suffering and we share the joy.

THE CHARACTER AND PROMISES OF GOD

The second way that we prepare for persecution is that we reflect upon the character and promises of God. Paul wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) Peter is

getting at the same idea when he writes that we should “humble ourselves” before Almighty God and cast all our anxieties on him because he cares for us.

(1 Peter 5:6-7)

As long as we live our lives trusting in our own ability to make life secure, we will never take a chance for the sake of the gospel. As long as we live based upon our anxieties about what might go wrong instead of what God wants us to do, we will never be persecuted for the faith nor will we share the suffering of Christ. And as a result, we will also never know the joy of serving Christ either.

Do you remember the story of the temptation of Christ that we studied at the beginning of Lent? The devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread and establish the kingdom of God the easy way, a way that avoided suffering. And Jesus rightly saw this as the temptation of the devil.

Peter says that the devil still tempts us. Like a lion waiting to capture its prey the devil lies in wait to discourage people of faith. And what lie does the devil use? It is the same one that he tried on Jesus. It is the lie that the life of faith should be a life without suffering or sacrifice.

On the contrary, the life of faith is a life of shared suffering. We are not alone; we have brothers and sisters the world over who help us and teach us what it means to believe in the face of tremendous odds.

We encourage and remind each other by our presence in times of need that the suffering of the present day will not overcome the grace of the coming day. The power of the cross will overcome the powers that be.

THE CROSS AND THE CATHEDRAL

On the night of November 14, 1940 the German Luftwaffe bombed Coventry, England. The city burned, and Coventry Cathedral that had stood since the 13th century collapsed under the onslaught.

The next morning the cathedral stonemason with great sorrow came to examine the smoking ruins and discovered that two charred roof timbers had fallen onto the pile in a shape of a cross.

He fastened the timbers together and set them up on an altar of rubble. Then on the sanctuary wall behind the cross, the provost of the cathedral chalked the words, “Father forgive.”

When the cathedral was rebuilt, the ruins of the old cathedral were not entirely cleared away. The new cathedral, rather than replacing what was destroyed, embraces the ruins to create a “moving, architectural declaration of remembrance and hope.”

Take this as a visual parable of how persecution and suffering can be transformed by the power of God’s new creation. We do not deny suffering or suggest that it is somehow not so bad. But, we

trust the power of God's Spirit to come into our broken lives and transform them into a memorial of hope and promise.

It begins with the cross, the cross of persecution and the cross of forgiveness. And it ends with a glorious cathedral of hope, a kingdom in which all of God's children will come together.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)