

March 20, 2016 “Living Lent as People of the Resurrection: PAIN” by Pastor Chris Myers-Tegeuder

Today is Palm Sunday. This is typically a Sunday of celebration. A remembering of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem when the people seemed to understand that Jesus was the Messiah. They seemed to recognize that he was the coming king. You heard it in the first scripture reading at the beginning of worship today. They said “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” And on Palm Sunday we re-proclaim that Jesus is messiah and king. But as we all know, a week later things looked much different. The religious leaders convinced a mob to chant “crucify him!” and the Jesus they had laid down their cloaks for just days before would be nailed to a cross and executed. It is still difficult for us to imagine the intensity of the crucifixion; the amount of suffering. The violent and grotesque scene, how awful it looked, the sounds of wailing and moaning from three men being crucified, the uncomfortable amount of time it went on. No one on the original Palm Sunday could have imagined what was coming...except for Jesus. Jesus knew what was coming. He knew he would suffer unfairly, he knew he would experience pain, and yet he went willingly, because it was the only way for us. And it is the necessary but unjust suffering of Christ, as well as the unjust sufferings of the Christians of the early church, that Peter comes to grips with in his first letter. So our reading this morning is from 1 Peter, chapter 2, beginning at verse 19.

Scripture reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25

19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22 “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” 23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” 25 For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

This letter from Peter, that we know as a book of the Bible as 1 Peter, speaks of suffering proportionately more than any other book of the Bible. Isn’t that surprising? When I think of Bible passages about suffering I usually think of Job first. But for its size, for its short length, 1 Peter says more about suffering than any other book. And there is probably a good reason for this. This letter was probably written between 60 and 65 AD. And does anyone know who was in power in Rome at that time? It was Nero. In 64 AD a great fire almost destroyed Rome. One of the outcomes of this fire was that large expanses of land were cleared which Nero then used to build a new palace complex. There were criticisms in Rome that Nero himself had started the fire because he wanted the land for his new palace. Although this is probably not true, the rumor gained so much popularity among Romans that Nero sought out a scapegoat for the fire. He decided to blame a small religious movement known as the Christians. Persecution and execution of Christians then became wide spread for several years. His reputation for the murder of many, not just Christians, eventually caused rebellion and he ended his reign in 68 AD.

The early church of this time period is the church of believers to whom Peter is writing in 1 Peter. So it comes as no surprise that the letter includes encouragement in tough times and Peter’s understanding of pain and suffering. Now Peter himself went through period of challenge regarding the subject of pain suffering.

Peter's view of Christ's suffering and the cross and his own suffering changed significantly over time. Peter changed a lot on this topic. Remember back in Mark chapter 8, early on Peter completely rejects the idea of Jesus being crucified. Starting in verse 8 it reads; "(Jesus) then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." Peter would have no thoughts or talk of Jesus being executed. He rejects the idea, he simply won't believe it. He also seems to miss the part about Jesus rising from the dead three days later. Then later, at Jesus' execution, Peter changes from rejecting Jesus' suffering to fear of it. He falls prey to fear. He is afraid he might also suffer. He is so terrified that he denies ever knowing Jesus. But then we get to this letter and Peter is a different person. We begin to see this change in Peter in Acts. In Acts chapter 2, Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter begins to quote David. And he says "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." This is a very different Peter than the one that tried to correct Jesus when he talked about his death, or the Peter that retreated in fear at the cross. This Peter has confidence. And he says to the crowd "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." Peter now gets it. Peter has taken a path beginning with disbelief, then being plagued with fear of what believing might cost him, then finally embracing Jesus and his death and resurrection. Peter knows who Jesus is and he now wants to make sure people come to know this Christ.

I wonder how many of us still need to make a transformation like Peter did. How many of us or how many people do we meet, that don't even want to buy in to the account of the crucifixion and resurrection? How many simply do not believe? In 2015 a Rasmussen poll found that 2 out of 3 American adults believe the basic tenets of Christianity, including the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And while some people would consider 2/3 a good statistic, I don't. That means 1/3 of Americans out there, including the children they are raising which are not included in the poll, do NOT believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are where Peter started, in disbelief. Then there are those of us who believe, but fear what it could cost us. Like Peter denying Jesus, many of the 2/3 of adults that say they believe the basic tenets of Christianity, don't live lives that reflect that. They are afraid of what people will think or say. Concerned it could affect them at work. I think probably all of us has rationalized our fear of sharing our Christianity at some point. I know I have. In a study by Lifeway Research back in 2012 (so this is a few years old now), they found that 61 % of Christians do not share their faith with others. 61 %! What are we afraid of??? Some of us are stuck at Peter's second phase of transformation, where we believe, but we are fearful of what it will cost us. Then there is where Peter lands, completely overjoyed by what Christ has done and ready to share it with others. And the early church was on fire for Christ. This little religious movement was growing fast. And the more that Roman leaders like Nero oppressed and persecuted them, the more Christianity grew. They did not let their fear stop them from sharing, despite the real threats and suffering that they could face.

So when the going gets tough for the early church, Peter not only encourages them, not only reassures them, but he also faces the topic of the pain and suffering. And Peter addresses a tough topic. He addresses unjust suffering. The topic of suffering is difficult enough. None of us likes to talk about suffering and even more so none of us likes to suffer. But in this passage Peter specifically addresses unjust suffering. Something we justice and freedom loving Americans have a hard time accepting. So Peter writes, beginning in verse 19 "For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for

doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you.”

Now there are two places in which the English translation here does not do the original words or meaning justice. The first is in verse 19 where it says that when you suffer unjustly you are conscious of God. “Conscious” is not the best word to describe that. The Greek word used for conscience there is a word that means “joint knowledge.” So it is not as much that you are conscious or aware of God, as it is that you and God have joint knowledge. In other words, God knows what you are going through and you as a Christian know that God is aware of what you are going through. Simply speaking, you are not alone. God is there in it with you. So Peter is saying to these early Christians, many of them by the way are slaves, Peter is saying to them that when you suffer unfairly, God knows it. And since you have a God that suffered for you, you can trust God.

Then in verse 20 there is another spot where the English word doesn’t quite do the passage justice. Peter writes “But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.” This part has been mistranslated and misunderstood many times. Some would take this passage and say, “see it says that it is good to suffer for God.” No, that is not what this passage is saying. Using the word “commendable” doesn’t help this mistranslation. God does not think that it is good for you to suffer. God does not like suffering. We should not seek out suffering thinking it will get us closer to God. Frankly, the world will bring you enough without you seeking it out. The point is not that God likes suffering. Oswald Chambers, one of my favorite Christian authors, wrote this: “To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; to choose God’s will even if it means suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God’s will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not. Be merciful to God’s reputation. It is easy to blacken God’s character because God never answers back, He never vindicates Himself.” A very fair statement by Chambers.

So if this verse does not mean that God likes suffering, what does it mean? The Greek word actually used here where we read “commendable” is *charis*. It is the word for grace. When you suffer unjustly and endure it, you show grace. And then Peter goes on to describe the grace Jesus showed. He says when you endure suffering you show grace and here is how Jesus showed that to us. This translation fits what follows it. Then we have the rest of the passage, going back to verse 21: “because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” So when you suffer unjustly and endure, you show the grace that Jesus showed when he suffered unjustly for you.

Peter then says that Christ has left us an example to follow. And the example he then lays out is a pretty tall order. First, he point out that Jesus “committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” I don’t know about you, but “no sin and no deceit from my mouth” is not something that can be said about me. I think we all know that we fall short of this example. However, that does not mean it shouldn’t still serve as an example. It doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try to live lives without sin and deceit. As Christians we are called to sin as little as possible. Yes, we will all fall short. But that does not mean lower the bar. Following the example of Christ actually means raising the bar. Famous preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote this: Figure out “What settings are you in when you fall? Avoid them. What props do you have that support your sin? Eliminate them. What people are you usually with (when you sin)? Avoid them. There are two equally damning lies Satan wants us to believe: 1) Just once won’t hurt. 2) Now that you have ruined your life, you are beyond God’s

use, and might as well enjoy sinning.” The example of Christ stands. We should still hold that example as something to value, even if we fall short.

Then there is the rest of the example. Peter writes, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” In other words, unjust pain and suffering did not give Christ a license to retaliate. I think one thing he is saying here is that even if we suffer, we do not have a green light to sin in response. It does not mean we cannot respond at all. The example here is specifically that Jesus did not retaliate in response and did not make threats in response. This is hard to do. I don’t know about you, but when I am unjustly wronged or hurt I want to get back. I want them to feel what I felt. To hurt the way I hurt. But scripture is telling us that God already knows how we hurt. And the appropriate response is to trust God. We all know retaliation gets us nowhere. Look at the violence around the world that is supposedly just retaliation for some other violence. Violence just breeds more violence. When we suffer pain, we are called to avoid reacting with sin and rather trust God.

Jesus entrusted himself to God in his pain and suffering. Verse 23; “he entrusted himself to him.” Imagine where we would be if Jesus had not trusted God with the plan. If in his suffering and pain he had said “nope, not going to do it. These people are not worth it.” Imagine where we would be. Thank the Lord he did it. Peter says it in verse 24; “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross...(that means Jesus experienced this physically)..., so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” By his wounds, the consequences of our sins have been addressed and we are healed.

But how do we apply this to the real pain and suffering in this world? How do we “entrust” ourselves to God in the midst of pain or suffering? Author and Pastor Tim Keller wrote a book a couple of years ago titled *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*. And he notes this at the beginning of chapter 11:

“Most books and resources for sufferers today no longer talk about enduring affliction but instead use a vocabulary drawn from business and psychology to enable people to manage, reduce and cope with stress, strain or trauma. Sufferers are counseled to avoid negative thoughts; to buffer themselves with time off, exercise, and supportive relationships; to problem solve; and to “learn to accept things we can’t change.” But all the focus is on controlling your immediate emotional responses and environment. For centuries, however, Christianity has gone both higher and deeper in order to furnish believers with the resources to face tribulation.”

So what does this mean? How do we face pain and suffering and not be consumed by it? One thing Keller points out that you face or enter suffering with the gospel. You start with the knowledge that Jesus already faced ultimate suffering, suffering the sin of humanity in his body on the cross, and he did it for you. Jesus endured for you, not because you earned it, not because you lived good enough, but because he loved you that much. You face suffering with the gospel, with the knowledge and realization of what God has already done for you. If you enter pain or suffering without the gospel, you won’t be likely to find God while in it. You will be tempted to feel alone or that God has punished you for something. Keller writes “a heart forgetting the gospel will be torn between anger and guilt.” The real pain and suffering that this life can throw at us is not for the faint of heart. You should not do it alone. You must take the gospel with you. You must remember the cross.

Another point on this is that your relationship with God, the real changing of your heart by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not meant to begin when the challenges begin. We are meant to walk with God all the time. Before suffering and during suffering and after suffering. We are not designed to just take God off the shelf when suffering happens. We are made to live as Christians in relationship with God all the time, not just when the going is good, and not just when our lives fall apart. The reading of God's Word, time in prayer, time in worship, all this builds up your spiritual muscles for when you will need them most. If you don't do it now, you won't have the advantage later.

Lastly, how do we know God is there when the going gets rough? Well, you have to treat God as though he is really there. You need to talk to him. Pray, pour your heart out. Use the Psalms. The Bible is full of God's people pouring their hearts out to him in times of suffering. In other words, don't ignore God when you need God the most. And you can trust the Bible as a guide. The Bible is full of people who faced suffering with God. I quote Keller here: "Throughout the Bible, we see many different actions and ways that sufferers faced their suffering. We are called to walk, to grieve and weep, to trust and pray, to think, thank, and love, and to hope." All of that is in the Bible.

As we enter this Holy Week, as we look towards the cross and eventually the empty tomb, let's look at that cross and the suffering that took place on it with Peter. And remembering Peter's different phases of understanding of the pain and suffering of Christ, let's join him with his later understanding. Let's not brush off the Jesus' sacrifice as not true. Let's not fear what Jesus' suffering means because of what it might cost us. Let's see the pain and suffering of Jesus Christ as God's ultimate expression of love and grace to us. And let's be confident that it is that God, the one that sacrificed it all, that God is the one that walks with us, and we can trust Him. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.