

Following the Risen Jesus: New Life through Tears

1 Peter 3:8-18, Matt 5:1-12

Good morning! Happy Memorial Day weekend! I am so glad to be able to be with you this morning. Memorial Day weekend for us is usually a time for get-togethers with friends for barbecues or heading out of town for a quick get away. This year we will be vacationing in our backyard, like many of you. Almost all of us have experienced suffering or hardships because of this pandemic. And many of us have also had to deal with some really horrible problems on top of COVID disruption and worry during this time—failing health, job losses, a terrible diagnosis, loved ones dying. Today's New York Times gave its entire front page, and more, to list all of the nearly 100,000 Americans who have died so far from COVID 19. This pandemic has made suffering a very present reality for all of us.

Today we are looking at how we can encounter good news—even blessings—in and through the bad news of suffering and pain. God assures us that we do receive blessings through our times of suffering and struggle, and that beyond that we are called to be a blessing to others too! We are called to be a blessing to others in our struggles.

Our first point today is that suffering happens. Suffering happens. Everyone has to deal with it. Some people have more suffering than others, for sure, but all of us have some hard times—that is life. One of the things I love about Christianity is that it doesn't ignore that reality or try to sweep it under the rug. No—our faith faces squarely the truth that suffering is part of life. In fact, we think that suffering is ESPECIALLY going to happen to us, to people who follow Jesus—the one who suffered for the benefit of others.

The surprising part is that suffering is not the end of the story. Even in suffering we experience the surprising gift of blessing. God always gets the last word and he chooses to bless us through our suffering. Our first reading today was the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus turns people's expectations upside down—who is blessed? Surely it is the rich, the successful, the ones for whom everything is going great, right? No—Jesus says it is the

poor, the grieving, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted on account of Jesus. That is who is blessed! Sometimes people misunderstand these verses, the Beatitudes. This is not a list of *how* to become blessed, it is a series of promises of blessings *in spite* of life's challenges. God's blessings are always a free gift—it is always grace, not earned. In the beatitudes we see that God blesses empty and broken people, he blesses people who reach out to the world to help, and he blesses those who are hurt because they are trying to follow Jesus.

Peter makes the same point in our reading today. We've been reading this letter from Peter over the last 6 weeks, learning how to follow the Risen Jesus. This short letter keeps coming back to the hard fact that we often suffer, and sometimes are treated badly *because* of our faith, but despite that God is faithful and he blesses us.

Listen to Peter's advice—be like-minded, have sympathy, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Don't repay evil with evil or insult with insult. No—break the chain of pain and repay evil with blessing. That's a powerful recipe for change isn't it? Even in the middle of suffering we are called to lives of radical caring for others.

Peter quotes from Psalm 34—keep your tongue from evil, turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. Psalm 34 is all about God's goodness in hard times. I hope you will take some time this week to read and pray through Psalm 34. It was written by David when he was in HUGE trouble. He was hiding out with Israel's enemies, the Philistines, because Israel's king Saul wanted to kill David. To avoid being killed by the Philistines David had to pretend to be insane. David literally was surrounded by enemies. He was in great danger. He had nowhere to run. That is the context of Psalm 34.

So how does he pray? The psalm begins "I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips." The Message translates it: "I bless God every chance I get; my lungs expand with his praise. I live and breath God; if things aren't going well, hear this and be happy. . . Is anyone crying for help? God is listening, ready to rescue you. If your heart is broken, you'll find God right there; if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your breath." David teaches us that God is with us through all kinds of trouble, so we can trust him and praise him.

That prayer reminds me of how to live. I have to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. I am grateful for being healthy, for the spring weather, for the flowers, for walks in the hills, for a church full of caring people, for the chance to walk for water last week. I need to practice saying thank you to God, even (or especially!) when I don't feel like it. I need to thank God for the things he is teaching me during this time of pandemic. We need to thank God for empowering us to share his love with others even in this time of disruption. What good have you discovered through this time? What can you be grateful for? For many of us it is intentional efforts to connect with others, increased family time, a chance to re-evaluate our priorities. To focus on what is really important to us—our family, our relationship with God, on how we choose to spend our time. But for others of us, the hurt is too raw and overwhelming right now.

I recognize this can be really hard. Some suffering is horrible. It can feel like more than we can handle. How are we supposed to deal with unbearable suffering? Let me tell you about Jerry Sittser. He is a professor at Whitworth University in Washington. Years ago, Sittser was in a horrible car accident. Someone crossed over the yellow line and ran into his van at 85 mph. His wife, his mother and one of his daughters were all killed. Can you imagine? He was left with three more children to raise and a mountain of grief and loss. Eventually Jerry Sittser wrote about this horrific experience in a book called *A Grace Disguised*. In that book he doesn't use happy talk or platitudes. He says he didn't get over the loss of his loved ones, rather he entered into his grief and pain. Sittser says, "I absorbed the loss into my life, like soil receives decaying matter, until it became part of who I am." He says that sorrow enlarged his soul. Sorrow enlarged his soul. In coming to the end of himself, Sittser found that he had arrived at the beginning of a vital relationship with God. He says that "our failures can lead us to grace and to a profound spiritual awakening." God can use our suffering to bring us closer to him!

We've seen that suffering is real, but that God gives us surprising gifts through the suffering. As many of you know, my sister in law Betsey died last Sunday afternoon. She was a long-time member of this congregation. In fact, she came to faith in Jesus through this congregation. You have been so kind and caring towards us, thank you very much. Death is

hard and complicated and stirs up all kinds of challenging issues. For Alice and me this loss—where our ability to be with Betsey and her husband and kids is limited due to the pandemic—just added to our inability two weeks ago to share in the joy of being at our daughter’s wedding in person. So many times in these last few weeks we’ve yearned to hold our loved ones and could not. We are missing a LOT of hugs right now!

But at the same time—we are starting to discover God’s surprising provision all around us through this time. Getting to spend more time with Betsey’s kids than we have in years is really a blessing. The family is pulling together and coming up with ways to care for each other despite the limitations of COVID 19. One of the greatest gifts God is giving us is through you—all of Betsey’s family is getting to realize how loved Betsey has been by this whole big church family that her children largely didn’t have any connection to. You are being ambassadors of God’s love to them!

That is our last lesson this week. Peter calls us to be a blessing to others. Even as we suffer, even as our lives are disrupted, we are still called to be a blessing. We are saved to serve. The blessing we *get* in the midst of suffering and the blessing we *give* are mixed together in these verses. You can’t pull them apart and dissect them. No—as we live our lives shaped by God’s unstoppable generosity and love, we will discover his blessings even in the middle of cancer or loss or pandemic, AND we will discover that we are avenues of his blessings through those things.

Being a blessing takes action on our part. Peter and Psalm 34 urge us to seek peace and follow after it. Seek peace and follow after it. That is active, intentional behavior. Do you see how even in hard times God’s way for us makes things better? Let’s follow after peace, not stir up conflict. Let’s be compassionate, not selfish. Let’s repay hurt with healing. Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. That is us. That is our role—to bring about peace, wholeness, flourishing where we live and work and play. But sometimes seeking peace can feel impossible. Keep on seeking after it.

Mary Johnson’s 20 year old son was shot to death at a party. She was so angry and filled with rage at his killer. The killer was caught, tried and convicted. Mary said she wanted him caged up like the animal he was. But after he had been in prison a while, she felt

compelled to meet him. She believed her Christian faith called her to forgive, even though she did not know how she could do that. She reached out to the killer, Oshea Israel. He was confused and skeptical about her request, but eventually --after about nine months-- he finally said yes and agreed to meet her.

Neither of them knew what to expect when they finally met at the prison. Mary said, “I don’t know you, you don’t know me, Let’s just start with right now.” Let’s just start with right now. That is a great way to live. They kept on meeting and eventually developed a friendship. Mary was able to forgive Oshea. She says that unforgiveness is like a cancer—it will eat you from the inside out. She said forgiving Oshea didn’t diminish what he’d done—he still killed her son, but the forgiveness is for her. It makes her feel less bad. And her forgiveness is changing Oshea too. He says that he has not completely forgiven himself yet, but he is working on it.

Eventually, after 17 years in prison, Oshea was released. Mary arranged for him to move into the apartment next door. Can you imagine that? The apartment right next door. She is loving her neighbor—even though he killed her son. Mary’s willingness to seek peace even in her terrible suffering changed her life. It is changing Oshea’s life. Now as they share their story of reconciliation around the country it is changing the lives of so many people who realize they don’t have to stay trapped in pain, unforgiveness, and conflict. That is what we are called to do too—to seek peace and follow after it—to be a demonstration to the world of what God’s shalom, God’s wholeness, looks like.

Church, God is calling us to be peace bringers, even in the middle of our own suffering. We aren’t trying to force everything to align with us—we can’t bring in God’s kingdom that way. No—we are demonstrating a different way to live to the world—showing others what it looks like to be a community of peace, and hope, and love, and service. As we walk together through this time of pandemic and of our own pain—let’s keep on taking care of one another and reaching out to our neighbors in love—showing the world what a people transformed by the love of Jesus looks like.

Let’s pray: Lord Jesus—all of us are suffering. All of us are hurting in different ways today. Help us to recognize the gifts you have put around us. Help us to see the blessings you

give even through our trouble. And empower us to be a blessing to the people around us, for your sake. In Jesus name we ask it, Amen.