

Sermon on 1 Peter 3:13-22 & John 14:15-21 – May 28/29,2011

Grace and peace to all of you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What we'll focus on today is, well, not exactly something that too many people like to dwell on. Today our focus will be on suffering, or as Jesus calls it, bearing the cross and following him. If you remember from last week, we focused on a passage from 1 Peter. In that passage Peter reminds his brothers in sisters in Christ to not forget the basics; Scripture, fellowship, the call to be a holy people, a holy priesthood, the call to be disciples of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus. If you remember, last week I also outline the context of this letter. This letter was written from “Babylon,” a catch word for the early Christians that commonly referred to Rome. The letter was written from Rome to some churches and Christian communities in what we call Turkey today. And as many of you may know, life for the early Christians wasn't always a walk in the park. The call to follow Christ meant abandonment and death; abandoning an old way of living, putting to death the old sinful self through the waters of baptism, and continuing to drown their sins in daily repentance. The call to follow Christ, to carry the cross, to be his disciple means that the life you live now isn't going to be a walk in the park.

Early Christians were thought of as a peculiar lot...and as I look out at you all, I see not too many things have changed. Anyways, the call to follow Christ often meant that you were an exile while living in your own home, while living in your hometown. You didn't go to worship or burn incense for the local god; Poseidon or Zeus or Hera or Saturn or Neptune or Mars or whoever was the local god. You didn't participate in the local feasts and festivals that were full of drunken entertainment and debauchery. You didn't live the way that everyone expected you to live. You didn't believe in the gods of the masses; gods that were more like vending machines than gods anyways. You believed in the one true God.

The early Christians, they suffered immensely, and I mean much more than for those who were martyred, like how we read about Stephen being martyred last week. They suffered being ridiculed, mocked, despised, being laughed at. I don't doubt either how they might have been bullied around for their beliefs and convictions and their dedication to their Lord. These Christians were like a scab that wouldn't go away. But they, like all us gathered here today, did have an unshakeable promise: They had been baptized and they belonged to the One true God. They had been baptized and they knew without a shadow of a doubt, with the firmest conviction, that whatever sufferings may come, they had this hope that was in them, they had this promise from God so tightly fastened to their hearts and minds that nothing would shake their trust in God.

Our call to follow Jesus Christ and be his disciple means that suffering, as much as we hate it, will come. You don't need to go and look for it...it will come to you somehow and someday. And suffering comes into ways; what happens outside of us, externally, and what happens within us, internally. First outside of us.

Since we all are members of a fallen humanity, we can see, clear as day, what can happen outside of us. For early Christians it was being mocked or being martyred. For many Christians in other parts of the world, it is the same for them. A good web page that you can go to for this is persecution.com. Other suffering that comes from outside of us can be seen in all the recent natural disasters; earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, all the recent flooding in Louisiana, all the tornadoes that have ravaged towns and counties in the south-eastern United States, with the most recent one being Missouri that has claimed over 130 people so far. This damage and loss from natural disasters of course, causes suffering to Christians and non-Christians. Not only that, but also look at all the fighting that goes on in the world, and look at how America's military is called on to keep peace and curb evil.

But there are some other external sufferings that comes our way, that is inflicted upon us, that is much more subtle and much more near to us, but still is dangerous. It comes from the media, or from neighbors or co-workers, or from classmates from school as they say that you aren't good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, etc. It's no wonder why we live in a time and place that demands instant gratification when many of us have been picked on or made fun of or made to feel less than human so then we will do whatever we can to fill that void; drinking excessively, gambling away what God provides for us, feeding our bodies and minds not with God's Word and holy living, but with filth and rubbish.

This then leads to internal suffering. Things happen outside of us that make us look at ourselves in different, and all too often, unhealthy ways...they cause us to look at ourselves as worthless, less than human, disposable (much like everything we buy), not a child of God claimed through the water and promise of baptism. Or we look at the all the wars, all of the natural disasters, and we wonder if God really is in control of this world He created. The internal suffering we feel and experience is something that we all too often want to hold onto as we might say to ourselves, "How could anyone understand me, what I'm going through, where I've been, what has happened to me?"

Both forms of suffering, internal and external, happen to all of God's people. There's no getting around it. However, there is a difference between how people handle it. As Christians we know that suffering will come to us. It's a given. It doesn't make things easier, but at least we're being truthful with ourselves. But like I said, there's a difference. We know that God is in control. Like how Peter reminds us today about how God wiped the earth clean of all wickedness with the flood. We know God is in control because also of this reason, and this is the most important: God suffered too. Peter also reminds us this: Christ suffered for sins, once for all, the righteous One for all of the unrighteous. And He did that to bring you God. And we won't stop there. Jesus reminds you all of the promise that

he won't leave you orphaned, alone, with no one to rely on, with no one to depend on. Jesus promises you the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to be with you forever.

Now what does this promise mean for you who suffer? It means this: You once we're promised and given the Holy Spirit when you were baptized. However, you often forget this promise. After all, it is difficult to have an unshakeable faith 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 ¼ days a year. This is why you need a preacher to give you that promise again and again, and if you don't want to listen to me you can listen to another brother and sister in Christ and they can tell you the same thing. With this promise fastened tightly to your hearts and mind, you can read the text from 1 Peter and say this: "I will not fear what others fear, I will not be intimidated. I will sanctify in my heart Christ as Lord, for Christ suffered for me and for my sins and for this entire world that rages against him. I will be that scab that is picked at, but I know that I am blessed for doing what is right, and I am blessed because I belong to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I have been saved through the waters and promise of baptism and because of what God has done for me, I will laugh at any and all suffering that comes my way. And I will gladly endure any cross God wants me to bear; and not only mine but I will gladly help my brother and sister in Christ through their sufferings."

In closing, I'll leave you with these words from a contemporary Christian song artist, Chris Tomlin. They're simple and easy to remember. And they can remind you of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who brings, strengthens, and keeps you in the one true faith in the face of any and all suffering:

"Our God is greater, Our God is stronger, God you are higher than any other. Our God is healer, awesome in power, our God, our God."