

Written Copy: 1 Peter 3:17-21 “Suffering for Doing Good?”

6th Sunday of Easter

Sunday, May 14th, 2023

Text: 1 Peter 3:17-21

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The text's intent

Suffering in the life of a Christian is bound to come. But it is far better to suffer for being a believer in Jesus who shares His love and good works with others than suffering for doing evil because some may take note of the injustice. But even if not, our suffering for righteousness' sake points to our Lord and Savior who suffered once, the only righteous man for all unrighteous humanity, so that His Spirit might bring them to the Father. He suffered for us in the flesh and His body died, but not His soul, which went to be with the Father. Then it was returned when the Father raised His glorified body to live again. He appeared to all the souls who, just as those alive when Noah built the ark, ignored God's call to repentance. But those who hear the call to faith in baptism are saved by the baptismal water that, just as it did with Noah, destroys the evil while saving those who trust in God in the ark of the Church. The continued washing regeneration of Baptism will carry us in the ark of the Church and deposit us on the shores of eternal life. From the right hand of the Father and ruling over all things our Lord Jesus Christ uses our suffering to turn people from sinful unbelief so that they might enter the ark of the Church through baptism and set their hearts on the resurrected Christ now and live with Him forever.

Focus Statement:

God tells us that when we suffer for righteousness' sake we are blessed because it shows that we are in faith toward Christ. He suffered as the only righteous man for all the unrighteous so that we might be cleansed of our sin and be brought into God's presence. The suffering we endure is never God's punishment for sin, Christ took all that on our behalf. We are declared righteous through our baptismal cleansing where baptismal water destroys the sin in our life and puts us into the ark of the Church where we are carried to the shores of eternal life. Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God means He controls all things, even our suffering, to serve His purpose that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth that He is the Savior of all.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We understand that our sins cause painful consequences. But we can question God's care and goodness when we are made to suffer for living in faith toward Him, and even trying to serve Him by loving others.

What the hearer should do as a result:

See the opportunity of our suffering as Christians as the opportunity to reach out to others and by our words and example be tools for the Spirit to call them to faith.

Subject Sentence: Christ uses our suffering to call/keep others in faith

Introduction: When Bad Things Happen to Good People

When I was a pre-teen, I remember my mom once taught Sunday School, filling in for the regular teacher who was on vacation. And for whatever reason, I thought I could get away with not paying attention and goofing off with my friends. I remember I was doing my best to try to get one of my friends to laugh, and in doing so get him in trouble while I would sit there with the innocent smile on my face. And I did get him to blurt out with a laugh at one point. But just then I felt a sharp tug on the hair at the top of my head. My mother knew exactly what I had been up to. She had snuck up behind me, and then she grabbed me by the hair of my head, and in that manner firmly escorted me from the classroom. I would've loved it if the rest of the class would've stood up in my defense, but they understood, as I came to understand as I sat out in the hallway in shame, I was getting what I deserved.

As Christians we all know and confess that our sinful actions often have consequences. But it's a different thing when we suffer having done nothing to deserve it. Bad things do happen sometimes to good people. Or maybe a better way to put it is bad things happen even to those who are in right standing with God by faith. And further, bad things happen even to those who are trying to be loving servants of Christ. And so, we wonder, why does this have to be? Why would our loving God allow this?

There is an old Chinese parable about a poor man who lived with his son in an abandoned fort. One day the horse they owned and depended on to haul vegetables to town—their sole means of support—ran away. When the neighbors heard about it, they went to the old man and expressed their sympathy. “Too bad,” they said. But the old man responded, “How do you know it's bad? The horse returned and brought back with him a dozen wild horses.” The neighbors said, “This is good!” The old man replied again, “How do you know that it's good? When my son tried to tame the horses, he broke his leg.” They tried to console him saying “Oh! That is very bad!” But, once again, the old man replied, “How do you know that is very bad? Shortly after that happened, a war broke out, but my son was laid up and did not have to go to the front.” Perhaps we lack the perspective to judge what is truly good and bad, as well as how God might use what is bad in our lives for His and our ultimate good.

How God Uses Bad Things to Shake People Up

God uses suffering to wake people up, to shake them out of their self-reliance, to realize they can't handle life on their own, so He can turn their hearts toward Him. A person that is content with their life lived outside of faith has no desire to believe and follow God, especially when this God's will and plan stands opposed to what their sinful heart desires.

Take for example those people in Athens that Paul tried to reason with and preach to. They don't appear to have any major problems in their life. Instead, they were free to sit around and talk about philosophy, wanting to hear what the newest and brightest notion was. They loved discussing life and suffering in the abstract sense, but not from the point of view of someone who is floundering in the midst of it. When Paul told them about the God they did not know, the Creator God who gives all things life including them, in whom all live and move and have their being, many were unmoved. So when he told them they needed to turn away from their love of all the other gods, and away from seeing themselves as the place where they can find all the answers, and instead to turn to the Lord in repentance, and believe in the One who was raised from the dead and was coming again to judge all men, many of those in the audience were done with him. Hearing about a new god was one thing, but the God that wanted all of their hearts and minds was just too much. And especially this crazy notion that He had risen again from the dead. They didn't personally need that God.

Or take for example the people of Noah's day. They were living out their normal every day lives, marrying and giving in marriage as Jesus would later describe them. With lifespans that reached between 700 – 900 years plus, and people being able to give birth during much of that, imagine how populated Noah's world may have been. And after living that long, how much knowledge and skill could one acquire? It is believed that the culture of Noah's time was far more advanced than we sometimes give them credit for. Just as in our day, they may have seen themselves as self-made men and women, equipped to handle whatever came their way. They were happily sinning, turned away from God with no need for Him. Noah's job while building the ark was to call out to them and persuade them as to just how very badly they needed God. He preached this message through his words and actions, telling them about the flood that will come at the hands of the one and only Creator God. So much water that the only way to survive it will be in the ark that Noah and his sons were building. But besides his family no one listened. They reasoned that it has never rained that much where all of the dry ground would be under water. They consider that to be impossible and Noah to be a fool, that is, until the rains came, and the flood waters rose, and God closed the door of the ark.

God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth: that He is the One true God, and they are not. He wants this to happen before it's too late. And so, He allows bad things to happen to unbelievers. We call it the Law not preached. He allows suffering to enter people's lives, things that are beyond their ability to control, in order to shake them from their sinful self-reliance.

But what about we who believe? Why must we suffer as well? The Lord desires that we suffer alongside the unbelievers so that we do not slip into the same self-reliance that would leave Him out of the picture. But He also desires that we suffer alongside the unbelieving world in order that we might give witness of our reliance and faith in Him, even in the midst of suffering. If our lives were carefree and rosy, would the unbelieving world ever want to commiserate in their suffering? They would hate us as people who couldn't understand how they feel. The unbelieving world already hates because our lives lived out in faith toward Christ are a convicting witness to them that they cannot tolerate. But when they see us suffering even as we do good, and even being put down and verbally abused as we try to help someone else, that makes people take notice. And especially when in our suffering, instead of turning away from God in anger, we turn toward Him in faith. That makes others stand up and take notice. And Peter points out that this kind of suffering that comes even when we are doing what is right in the eyes of God, points toward a much greater kind of suffering.

Pointing to the Righteous Who Suffered for the Unrighteous

Peter describes our Lord Jesus Christ as the only Righteous man ever to live. His entire life: all that He did and taught was always in right standing and total agreement with the will of God. Yet He endured criticism and mocking from the religious leaders who were supposed to watch for Him as the Messiah, welcome Him, and point the people to believe in Him. Instead, in response to His faithful teaching and miraculous and loving healing, they sent Him off to suffer horribly and to die. Yet His suffering and death was far from meaningless. By His suffering and death, you and I are made right with God. He suffered God's wrath not for His own sin because He had none, but for your sin and mind. And by His stripes, by His suffering, death, and resurrection, we are healed from the terminal sickness that sin causes, eternal separation from our loving Creator God. Because He suffered for you, and by His final words on the cross, "It is finished", you can know for certain that any suffering that comes into your life is not God's wrath being poured out. It was completely poured out on Jesus.

Just as Noah and his family were saved from the destruction of all life during the flood, our baptism is our sure and certain sign that we will be saved from the eternal judgment to come. During Noah's flood the water was the means by which the sinful world was destroyed. But the flood water also worked to save all who were in the ark by lifting it high above the destruction below and then depositing Noah and his family back on the shore of the newly cleansed earth. The water of our baptism lifts us up out of lives lived in sinful self-reliance and places us in the ark that is the church. Here we daily look to our Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, mercy, and help, even as we suffer the problems and troubles that come in this world. And here in the ark that is the church our souls are kept safe and in faith towards Him as His Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to keep us relying on Him alone, until that day we are deposited on the shore of eternal life to come.

We witness to the power of Jesus' saving work of the Gospel as we cling by faith to Him throughout whatever troubles may come. It's not that the troubles we face don't hurt us, they do. It's not that the pain of loss doesn't hurt us, it does. But in the midst of it all we have an assurance that God has not given up on us. We have the truth of the resurrection, that Jesus sacrifice on our behalf was accepted by the Father who rose Jesus body and soul back to life.

But what about Jesus descending into hell, which Peter mentions? Why did He go there? Was it to give those who died in unbelief a second chance? Jesus Himself taught that when the eternal banquet begins, those who are not dressed in faith toward Him will be cast into the outer darkness of eternal suffering. After the Father raised Jesus from death to life everlasting on Easter morning, He went to announce to the souls of those who died refusing to believe the salvation promises of God, that the Lord does indeed save, and He is that long promised salvation. In this He came to pronounce judgment to them. And to give witness to all of us still alive on earth: believers and unbelievers alike, to turn to Him in baptismal repentance and work with the Spirit to remain in repentance, before He returns on the Last Day, and it is too late.

But we also have the witness that is His resurrection and ascension. He is at the right hand of God controlling all things. Whatever suffering is allowed to come into our lives He allows it. It come from His hand for a purpose; one that we might not completely understand now, but nonetheless is for our eternal good as well as those who we might get to witness to with our words and our lives.

Conclusion

As many of you already know, several weeks ago Bonnie Petee was driving when she was struck head on by a car that turned right in front of her. She was in her new car that she had just bought. She was out running errands to help out others. She didn't deserve this tragedy, but it happened. She could've been killed, but she wasn't. As she told me when I first visited her in the hospital, she has a story of faith to tell. She firmly believes that God's hand of protection and His mighty angels surrounded her at the moment of impact and protected her from death or even more serious injury than she sustained. The Lord made sure that neither Ken nor Mark were with her in the passenger seat, because anyone who had been sitting there would've been killed instantly. The Lord brought people on the scene immediately who dialed 911. There was an off-duty nurse who stopped by who helped out until the ambulance arrived. And while the injuries she sustained were serious, none of them were life threatening, and she will recover from them. She shared this witness of God's grace and mercy and protection with nurses and doctors and with me, and it certainly lifted me up.

Meanwhile Ken was at home and not doing well. He was mixing up his medication, not eating right, and had developed an infection in his toes. But the Lord used this to get him into the same hospital where Bonnie was so that he could receive the care that he needed, and she could visit him. But the infection in his foot was worse than anyone thought. It had begun to move up his leg. They ended up having to do emergency surgery and amputated six of his toes last week. And before he could completely recover from that surgery, sometime Friday evening, he quit breathing and passed away.

Here was another tragedy laid upon Bonnie's heart. In the midst of trying to heal from her accident she now is mourning the passing of her beloved husband. He passed away after she had said "See you later" as she left the hospital to go to a rehab nursing facility, not knowing this would be the last time she would see him alive on this earth. But despite all that, rather than turn away from the Lord in anger she turned toward Him in faith. She is filled with sorrow over his passing and is heartbroken. But she holds fast to Jesus promise that He will never leave her or forsake her. And her faith is a source of comfort and strength for her son Mark, as well as me. And the Lord has shown his loving and caring hand in the way the nursing staff has gone over and above to provide her with comfort and assistance. They were doing that before the news came of Ken's passing, but now even more so.

Bonnie's story is not over yet. But in the midst of it all you can see the hand of God working through her suffering to keep her in faith and to give witness to it to those around her. Who knows in what powerful ways He will continue to use it in the days and weeks to come. All because Jesus suffered once and for all for her, for you, and for me, that through the power of the Spirit working in baptism our suffering might be drawn closer to God and be the tools the Spirit uses to draw others closer too. Amen.