

Do We Really Have to Suffer?
A Sermon on 1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11
Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 28, 2017

Introduction

We try to avoid suffering. Suffering is the bearing of pain. The pain can come from loss or injury. Who wants to endure pain?

Peter tells us today that Christians should take joy in suffering. Joy and suffering are not words that most people put together.

Most people are willing to suffer only if the pain is short-term and there is long-term gain. An athlete is willing to endure the pain of working out to in hopes that he will be successful when he competes. A mother is willing to endure the pain of childbirth because of the joy that she anticipates in having a baby.

Peter seems to go beyond this. We will endure suffering if there is a payoff, but taking joy while we are in the midst of suffering? How can that be?

First Move: Joy in Suffering

Peter is addressing Christians in Asia Minor who already are suffering when he writes the letter. Peter says, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you.” Their suffering takes the form of fire that is testing them, purifying them to melt away the impurities.

Peter is not specific about the type of suffering or where it comes from. The only suffering that he specifically mentions is being insulted in the name of Christ. That could be slaves who are insulted by the non-Christian masters for taking on a new religion. It could be wives who are insulted by non-Christian husbands. It could be anyone in the Christian community who is insulted by someone they know.

Peter uses the word Christian in referring to the people who are suffering. 1 Peter and Acts are the only two books in the New Testament that use the word Christian. Apparently the word was coined by outsiders who were hostile to the followers of Christ. They looked at Christ as a ridiculous figure. The oldest drawing of Christ was carved in a wall in Rome. It may date back to the first century. It is a picture of a person with a donkey’s head, hanging on a cross. The inscription says, “Alexamenos worshipping God.” The picture is mocking someone named Alexamenos for worshipping a donkey named Jesus.

It was an absurd idea in the first century. The Lord and Savior of the world is someone who was crucified as a criminal by Rome. Most Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah, and still do. Their reasoning is simple. If Jesus is the Messiah, where is the Messianic kingdom?

The early Christian didn't have to seek out suffering. Suffering came naturally from following Christ. It is the clash that results from a conflict in values. Jesus proclaims a reversal of values. The last will be first and the first will be last. The greatest among you will be the servant of all. Turn the other cheek; don't strike back. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. In the Christian community, slaves and women were treated as equals. Everyone ate together. Those are threatening ideas in a culture based on hierarchy, wealth and military might.

Peter sets this suffering within God's story. The kingdom is based on different values. Suffering is inevitable if we are loyal to Christ. We refuse to worship the gods of the world. We refuse to participate in empty practices and pleasures.

Suffering is an evil but it can be an occasion for joy. Joy comes from sharing in the suffering of Christ.

It is the kind of joy that is on a different level from pleasure and pain. Thomas Merton says in *The New Seeds of Contemplation*: "You were not created for pleasure. You were created for spiritual joy. . . . Spiritual joy is beyond pleasure and pain." It comes from communion with God.

We experience this joy already in the present when we participate in a community that practices non-violence, embraces justice, treats everyone as a brother and sister and deepens our spiritual life.

We experience joy in the future in the revelation of Christ's glory. It brings light into darkness and reveals a reality that is based on truth instead of false ideals. It will transform all people's hearts and minds.

Glory in the Bible refers to the presence of God. God's glory appears as a pillar of cloud and fire in Exodus, leading the Hebrew slaves to freedom. Suffering is the site of God's glory. God's glory is present wherever there is suffering. God suffers with them.

Imagine that you were there when the crucifixion was taking place. The glory of Jesus was transparent even to the Roman centurion who commanded the squad that executed Jesus. When he saw Jesus suffer on the cross and breath his last, he said, "Truly this one is the son of God." That spirit of glory rests on each Christian as they suffer courageously in the face of ridicule.

Peter also links suffering to the final judgment. Being part of the chosen people does not exclude Christians from judgment. They are first in line to be judged. Part

of that judgment is whether they endured suffering or avoided it, whether they are Christians in name only or whether they actually followed Christ.

“Let the ones who are suffering set their souls on a faithful creator.” Suffering must never immobilize the Christian with fear. Trust is the opposite of fear. The foundation of Christian existence is trust in God.

Second Move: Trust in God

“Be humbled under the mighty hand of God.” The proper attitude before the faithful creator is humility. Being humble means recognizing the truth of our standing before God. It does not produce servile fear but confidence in God’s abiding strength. Humility toward one another is grounded in our relationship with God.

The imagery of the mighty hand of God recalls the Exodus story, when the mighty hand of God forced Pharaoh to let the people go.

Humility now, then exaltation. Suffering now, then glory. We are exalted by being incorporated into God’s plan for the world.

Peter is calling us to entrust ourselves to God’s care. The messianic life is possible only if we trust God completely. It frees us from the constant temptation to assert our own power. It is a participation in Christ’s life of trust, which precedes and defines ours.

“Cast your anxieties upon him, because you matter to him.” Anxiety is similar to fear. Fear is in the present; anxiety in the future. Fear is a primal feeling that is a response to an immediate threat. Anxiety is more generalized. It is dread of a future threat. That dread dissipates when we trust in God.

“The devil walks around like a roaring lion, searching for something to swallow up.” Evil is not passive but aggressive, prowling like a roaring lion. Your true adversary is the devil. The demonic lurks behind the suffering. The demonic is the ultimate opponent not the Gentiles. We are tempted to engage in warfare with people who lash out at us, but that is a trap. We succumb to the demonic by responding to insults with insults.

Christians are to respect authority and be subordinate to their superiors in the social structure, but they are to resist the devil. They rely on the steadfastness of their faith. Keep doing good. Cling to your Christian values. You can do this, even when you are suffering.

Peter comforts the Christians by telling them that they belong to a worldwide fellowship of Christians who suffer just as they do. Wherever there are Christians, acting as Christians, they suffer. The Christians of Asia Minor belong to one people

of God scattered throughout the world. God's people have been scattered, but they trust that they will be brought home and made whole.

The letter ends with a promise. "And the God of all grace, the one who called you in Jesus into the age of his glory, after you have suffered a little while, himself will put in order, establish, strengthen, lay the foundation." God on God's own initiative called to you and made you part of God's story. Your suffering will last only a little while, then you will join Jesus in the age of glory. God himself will put things in order.

Third Move: Suffering as a Christian Today

Miguel A. de la Torre, a liberation theologian, says that suffering is the norm for the vast majority of the world's population. Few congregations in America have experienced this kind of suffering. A notable exception would be African-American churches.

Few congregations in America have experienced the kind of suffering that Peter's churches endures. We are not insulted for being Christians. Being Christian is socially acceptable. In some circles, it is socially expected.

How do white, middle-class Christians suffer in America? Not suffer in general but suffer as Christians? Peter urges us not to seek out suffering. Suffering is painful. We do not seek out pain. We will encounter it naturally as a follower of Christ. We will encounter it naturally by participating in God's story.

It has been hard for me to read books the last three years. I have done most of my reading on my iPad and on the computer. I had to hold books close to my eye to read and prepare for sermons. It is much easier on my iPad; the type is brighter and bigger. When I had cataract surgery two weeks ago, I could read without reading glasses for the first time in 15 years. I celebrated by reading a book I have been wanting to read for a long time: *The Prophets*, written by Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1962. Heschel is a scholar of the Hebrew Bible and a Jewish theologian. His image of God in the book has profoundly influenced Christian theologians in the last 50 years.

Heschel challenges the dominant image of God as unchanging and impassable. This is an image of God from Greek philosophy not from the Hebrew Bible. The ideal in Greek thought was to be entirely self-sufficient. God is not dependent on anyone and not affected by anyone. Aristotle called God the unmoved Mover. It is almost like God is an absolute, an abstraction.

Heschel says that this image of God is nothing like the God who is described in the Hebrew Bible. The God of the Hebrew people is a God of pathos. God cares

about people. God hears the cries of the Hebrew slaves, groaning under Egyptian oppression, and God acts. God sees the rich taking land from the poor, adding field to field and house to house, and expresses his disgust at the offerings given to him by the rich. God especially cares for the widow, the orphan and the resident alien—they are the people who suffer most in ancient Israel.

When the Old Testament talks about the wrath of God, it is describing God in pain. God is hurt when the poor suffer because they are oppressed or neglected by the king and the ruling elite. God is hurt when the people refuse to trust him and worship false idols.

God acts because God cares what happens to people. Life is not just a random series of events, chemical reactions that have no deeper meaning. Life is more than “one damn thing after another.” History is affected by a God who acts, not out of reason or cool detachment, but out of pathos.

You cannot say that God is a God of love and at the same time say that God is unchanging and unpassable. To love someone is to be affected by them. You suffer when they suffer.

Peters says in today’s text, according to the NRSV translation, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” The Greek is actually more indirect: “It is a care of him concerning you.” That is so passive it sounds awkward in English. I translate it as: “You matter to him.”

The suffering of the Christians in Asia Minor matters to God. God is affected by that suffering. God suffers, too, just as God suffered when Jesus was hanging on the cross.

If we are to play a part in God’s story, we will care about the ones who are suffering today. The most vulnerable people today are the immigrant, the refugee, the prisoner, the hungry, the homeless. You may think of others to add to the list.

Jesus said these people are invisible. They are like Lazarus lying in a heap at the gates of the Rich Man, longing for scraps that fall from his table.

We have adopted the Rich Man’s values. The suffering of the poor is invisible to us. We are blind to the suffering of African-Americans in northeast Oklahoma City, Latinos in south central Oklahoma City, and Native Americans in rural southeast Oklahoma. We move to the suburbs so our children don’t have to go to school with them. Our Mother’s Day Out is a notable exception. Half of our students are children of color.

Who notices the poor in our society? Payday lenders. Bail bondsmen. Used car dealers who offer express credit. They profit on the poor.

Our political and economic systems feed upon the suffering of others. Systemic injustice. We have reduced taxes to the point that we no longer fund essential government institutions, such as public schools and prisons. The only taxes that can get approved by the legislatures are taxes that fall heaviest on the poor.

If we care about the invisible people, it will cause us pain to see them suffer. That is suffering that comes with being a Christian. We will see that part of their suffering comes from a system that grinds them up. We also will suffer if we challenge that system. We will get discouraged from banging our heads against the walls of the system.

Peter tells us that we should rejoice and be glad in our suffering. This is the point where we meet Christ. Christ is already there when we meet the naked, the poor, the homeless and the imprisoned. Christ is there when we challenge the injustice of the system. Christ is there when we respond to violence with non-violence. Suffering brings us into communion with Christ and with those whom Christ loves.

Conclusion

We begin this sermon series on 1 Peter six weeks ago with a quote from Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist theologian:

America is the exemplification of what I call the project of modernity. That project is the attempt to produce a people who believe that they should have no story except the story that they choose when they had no story. That is what Americans mean by “freedom.”

Christians have a story. We didn’t choose it. God chose us to be part of it. We are people who follow Christ wherever he leads, which often is to people who are suffering. We will suffer, too. We suffer because we care. We can rejoice in our suffering because we meet God and Christ there.

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