

“By His Wounds”

4th Sunday of Easter, Year A

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1 Peter 2:19-25

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Prayer.

All pain isn’t equal.

That is what Peter is telling the church today.

First, he states, is the pain endured as a result of doing wrong.

This pain is deserved, earned, even, some would suggest, this pain is due.

Lie, cheat, or steal ... and go to jail.

Harm your neighbor, and find yourself served a summons.

When one comes to the moment of decision,

is faced with two or more alternatives,

weighs the benefits and risks of each choice,

and intentionally chooses to do wrong,

one takes on the responsibility for making that choice.

Oh, yes. People will howl. They’ll whine, complain, and cry their eyes out.

But do not be tempted to help share the responsibility for someone else’s poor choice,

because this quickly becomes

enabling

for them to continue to make additional poor choices.

And so it goes.

When the offender is the self:

Do not try to justify sinful behavior.

Do not try to bargain ourself out of taking responsibility.

Part and parcel of being an adult is taking responsibility for our personal behavior.

This is maturity.

It is stepping up to the plate and accepting the consequences for our sin.

Jail is painful.

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Rehab hurts.

Divorce, loosing your license, paying the fines, accepting the penalty, making reparations ... it is all meant to cause pain.

Peter doesn't say it, but psychologically, the only benefit of this pain is that it teaches, so we don't go back and do it all over again.

At most, the only benefit of this type of pain is that it is memorable.

Burn your hand once and it hurt like heck.

Twice, you kick yourself for forgetting how hot the oven is.

But you don't do it a third time.

By the third time around, we try like the devil's personally chasing us, not to make the same painful mistakes again.

"What credit is that?" Peter rightly asks.

Peter is feeding the deeper existential yearning:

why are we here? and what is our purpose?

Is it our only purpose to suffer and die and return to the dust of stars?

No.

Our deeper purpose is to have God's approval, Peter correctly claims.

The other type of pain is what we should really focus upon in our epistle from Peter for this morning: This is the undeserved, unmerited, either unjustly perceived or seemingly random pain that is in the world.

We all know about it.

It was the title of a good book a few years ago: "Why bad things happen to good people."

It has been around for thousands of years. The old testament book of Job was written entirely on this subject.

Some people, it seams, are meant to suffer and die.

Illness, disease, a random collision of physics and metal;

ingesting something that causes a heart arrhythmia, which cascades out of control, and results in catastrophe;

simply being born with the wrong set of genes;

some people, it seams, were simply meant to suffer.

"What is that suffering about?" we ask.

A number of years ago, I remember visiting a dying colleague. He was dying of lymphoma, and he suffered terribly. I'll never forget him turning to me, while lying there weak in his hospital bed, and Jim saying to me, "Ya know, Todd, many have asked me the question, 'Why you? you've always led a virtuous life. Why you?'" He smiled at me and said, "and I tell them, 'why not me?'"

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In reflection, I know that Jim was a student of First Peter. “For to this you have been called,” Peter says, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow his steps.”

Ancient thought connected suffering with guilt and punishment.

But we know better.

Christ suffered, but was guiltless.

We, too, often suffer, without any source of guilt or wrongdoing; not having made poor or wrong choices; even when we’ve led a completely righteous and virtuous life.

When we suffer without cause, our suffering can be connected ...
it can be linked ...

with the suffering Christ endured on our behalf.

This is what gives meaning to our suffering.

This is what leads to God’s approval.

This is the key to unlocking life’s deepest existential questions.

It was a great witness to the faith,
a tribute to the saints who have gone on before us,
to find myself privileged to be by Jim’s bedside that day.

“Why not me?” he asked

“Why not me?” I have learned to ask.

And I pray the next generation that follows will remember this sermon, will make the connection of lineage back to the apostle Peter, and will make the connection:

Undeserved suffering is an opportunity to be drawn closer to Christ,
to reach through him to feel his pain,
such that,

by his wounds we might be healed.

Sometimes healing is the same as cure.

But often times it is not.

Jim died shortly after I visited him for the last time.

Generally, healing has much more to do with reconciliation:

being reconciled with one another,

and being reconciled with God.

It is all about preparing the self; making myself ready for the next stage that God is only now beginning to open to me.

Healing is all about recognizing the gifts that God has given us, and matching them up with the needs of the world. God’s kingdom is far more likely to come by us driving a nail in a Habitat House, than it is by Jesus swooping down in a fiery chariot.

Finally, I would add one thing that isn’t directly mentioned in the narrowly selected passage from First Peter this morning, and that is this:

Undeserved, unmerited pain is an opportunity teach by means of example.

Jesus expects us to run the race of faithfulness throughout our life, and to pass the baton on to the next generation of His disciples who will take over when our time has passed.

Just as a disciple passed on Peter's message to Jim, and Jim to me, I hope that I will have the strength and the privilege, to one day live up to the Gospel that I've been preaching all my life.

Children, youth, and new adult Christian disciples look to us who are more mature in our faith. They look to us, not only to talk the talk, but to also walk the walk.

When we lead the faithful life, and live the example, connecting our suffering with Christ, our Lord and Savior, others are looking to us for the cue, for what the faithful response should be.

Make certain our actions and our words lead back here to Peter: "by his wounds you have been healed ... now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

All pain is not equal.

Thank God for that!

Allow your pain to make the connection with Christ and his pain.

For through him, we are healed.

Amen.