

Enduring Suffering
I Peter 3:13-4:2

Friends, our world is suffering. There is deep pain all around us. People are physically sick and dying while others are living in fear of becoming infected with COVID-19. People are emotionally fragile for our economy is in turmoil, jobs are being lost and lives have been unended by the stay in place orders. People are afraid for the future is unknown and there is so much conflicting information and unrest all around us. People are angry and hurt for a series of events have revealed once again the sin of racism and prejudice that still exists in our nation. People are fed up with the ways many are treating one another, the lack of compassion and are searching for ways to speak out in the midst of injustice. And others feel helpless in the midst of so much angst and do not know how to help.

I don't know about you but my heart has been heavy this week. For we seem to not have learned anything from our past. History seems to be repeating itself. The anxiety level in our country is palpable and as people have tried to raise the issues others are causing havoc and making things worse for everyone. I do not in any way want to say that I have a solution to the many issues before us today. For I don't. And these are very complicated issues with concerns on all sides. But I do believe that scripture offers us some ways to guide us as Christians as we seek to endure the suffering we are dealing with in our country and our world today.

Peter's message in our passage today can be summed up in one sentence. Christians are called to endure unjust suffering just as Jesus Christ did for the sake of others in order to bring us and them to God.

There are four key phrases here that I want us to unpack today. First, we are called to endure

unjust suffering. The writer of I Peter acknowledges that for as long as anyone can remember there has been unjust suffering in our world - struggles between God's people and others. There have been the haves and the have nots that have caused power struggles. There have been conflicts between clans and brothers and sisters. Animosity and prejudice has raised its head in every generation. And yet at the same time - in the midst of all the conflicts throughout scripture God's instructions to God's people has been to care for one another - especially the widows, the orphans, the poor and the aliens. It is our calling as Christians.

At the time I Peter was written the early church was suffering because of their faith. They lived in the midst of the Roman empire and the life God was calling them to live was at odds with the culture around them. The truth my friends is that as every year goes by we as Christians find ourselves more at odds with the culture around us. And therefore we are aware of the unjust suffering around us for the values we hold of love and compassion for all are being compromised. So these words which we read this day are just as profound for us in this generation as they were centuries ago.

For the writer of I Peter reminds these early Christians and us that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been given a model to follow for Jesus Christ suffered for us and taught us how to endure unjust suffering.

Max Lucado, in his book In the Grip of Grace (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 113) tells the story of a remarkable facility near the city of Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil. More than fifty years ago the Brazilian government turned a prison over to two Christians. The institution was renamed Humaita, and the plan was to run it on Christian principles. With the exception of two full-time staff, all the work is done by inmates. Families outside the prison adopt an inmate to work with during and after his term. Chuck Colson visited the prison and made this report.

When he visited Humaita he found the inmates smiling - particularly the murderer who held the

keys, opened the gates and let him in. Wherever he walked he saw men at peace. He saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs His guide escorted him to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, the guide told Colson, that block houses only a single inmate. As they reached the end of a long concrete corridor and the guide put the key in the lock, he paused and asked Colson, 'Are you sure you want to go in?'

'Of course,' Colson replied impatiently, 'I've been in isolation cells all over the world.'

Slowly the guide swung open the massive door, and Colson saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the inmates - the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross.

'He's doing time for the rest of us,' the guide said softly.

He's doing time for the rest of us. That is the image that defines unjust suffering for us. Jesus hanging on the cross for us. Fred Craddock has said "In this one image there can be found the God who suffers with us, love that endures rather than avoids pain, companionship with Jesus Christ, fellowship with others who gather at the cross, a sense that in the larger scheme of things **even suffering can have meaning**, and the sure hope of life beyond suffering through the resurrection of the crucified Christ." (I Peter, Craddock, p. 60)

Friends, because of God's love for us and Christ's willingness to suffer for us - to do time for us on the cross - we have a model to follow when we experience suffering. That is what the writer of I Peter was seeking to explain to the early Christians. We talked last week about following in Jesus' steps. In chapter 3 verse 8 the authors words summarize what it means to follow in Christ's steps. "*Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be compassionate, be humble.*"

Friends, we are called to endure unjust suffering just as Jesus did. The writer of I Peter says that means we are called to *Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why we are living the*

way we are, and he adds *and always with the utmost courtesy.*” We have a responsibility to witness to the life of Christ and to tell others why we are making the life choices we are. The life choices that Jesus taught begin and end with loving one another. Caring for and helping all people for all human beings are made in the image of God. Not only do we help but we are also called to use our voices to speak up for those in need - those who are hurting and suffering - in ways that honor all people and do not inflame anger and hurt.

For the third phrase says we endure unjust suffering just as Jesus did for the sake of others. Everything Jesus did was for others. Jesus sat at table with the tax collectors and sinners challenging them to live differently. He ministered to the poor, the lame, the lepers, the ill always offering healing and hope. He showed compassion for the prostitutes and prisoners. He offered food to the masses and modeled loving kindness to all. He took the disciples aside and taught them how to live as he did even when they made mistakes. He even died for the sake of others - for us. Friends, we are called to a life of putting others needs above our own and loving deeply.

One of the reasons I love Eugene Petersen’s translation of this passage is because of the plain language he uses. There is no mistaking the point. He says *“Since Jesus went through everything you’re going through and more, learn to think like him.”* Learn to think like him. We are not just to act like Jesus but we are to learn to think like him too. Friends, if we are thinking and acting like Jesus it means that we are other centered. We care what happens to our brothers and sisters and we want to be part of finding solutions to their struggles and to find ways to bring peace into our world.

Our scripture goes on to say: *“Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way.”* We are called to not be self centered but to think of others needs before our own needs. We are called to care about everyone whether they are African American, Latino, Caucasian, Native American, Asian or any race. We care about the young and the

old, male and female, those with preexisting conditions and those who are healthy. We care about the George Floyd's and the Ahmaud Arbery's in our world and at the same time we care about law enforcement officers who are doing their jobs. We care about the protestors and the authorities who are seeking to keep peace. We care about the business owners who are negatively impacted by rioters and looters and we care for the looters who stole property. We care about everyone involved for that is what Christ did. And we take the time to work for the peace and welfare of all. It is a heavy burden but friends that is what we are called to do.

And my friends, to be able to make any inroads in finding peace and hope for our hurting world, we must learn to listen to one another even if the conversations are hard. We must learn to take the time to try to put ourselves in other's places and try to understand their pain. Most of us are privileged individuals in our society today. We have most of what we need in life and we have been raised to be law abiding citizens as well as faithful Christians. We have been inconvenienced by the pandemic but if we are honest we have not been deeply affected financially or even health wise as a congregation. For that we are grateful. But because of that we may find it hard to understand the pain that so many others especially those of color feel in our society at this moment. So we must learn to listen to their stories so we can understand a little bit about what they are going through. And we must learn to listen without judgment so that we can come to understand their pain and begin to work together on solutions. Friends, if we want to learn to think like Jesus we must put ourselves in places where we intersect with people who are different than we are, who are in different life circumstances and we must seek to hear their pain so that we can learn from them and change our world.

In order to really hear their pain we must learn a new language so that we can communicate through the pain and built-in prejudices we have. Think about the many benefits in knowing a foreign language. One of the chief benefits lies in the increased ability to understand and be understood. For

if we know only one language, we are tempted to think that everything we communicate is understood. Even though it isn't always. However, if we are forced to translate an idea into another language, we must consider various possible words to use and their shades of meaning as well as all of the other elements of the language. This effort to find the right words opens up a door, allowing us to communicate in new ways. That is the power of enduring suffering as Christ did for the sake of others. It forces us to think in new ways and to find a new language that has the power to bring healing to our world.

The final phrase is in order to bring us and them to God. Friends, we endure unjust suffering just as Christ did for the sake of others because we know what can happen when we do. We know what a difference it can make in our lives and in the lives of others. For we know that following in Christ's steps leads us to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ through God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that is why Christ died for us - so that all the world might be saved and come to know God's love.

Friends, the road ahead is not easy. As Christians we are called to endure unjust suffering just as Jesus Christ did for the sake of others in order to bring us and them to God. God needs every one of us to do what we can to bring hope into our broken world. Are we willing to do the hard work to make it happen?