

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2020

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

1 Peter 2:19-25 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. **20** But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. **21** To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. **24** "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." **25** For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

"Secure with the Suffering Shepherd"

Where are you today? I don't mean that literally. You're probably trying to chuckle so you don't get upset. Of course I'm at home, you're thinking. Where else could I be? But there is something more important than your physical location. Where is your head? Your heart? If your life has been chaotic the past few weeks, then maybe you need an escape from the madness and just distract yourself with your phone or some TV shows. If you have been fighting off boredom by absorbing an onslaught of news or constantly scrolling social media or doing daily movie marathons, you might feel like huge chunks of your day just got sucked into a black hole. But where you are today probably has a lot to do with what you are giving your head and your heart.

Which is why today's lesson from 1 Peter is so appropriate. Peter acknowledges hardships in our lives. And in the middle of challenges, he encourages us to return to Jesus. God's people live under the security of the Good Shepherd. Jesus provides for us and watches over us. And that allows us to take a very different, very unnatural approach to the challenges we face and even extend grace to the challenging people in our lives. That's where we want to be. With the Good Shepherd. That's where we need to be to find peace and safety. With Jesus. That's where we will be secure even in times of crisis since we have ultimate confidence in our Shepherd who suffered in our place. We have eternal blessings now even while we face hardships because we are secure with the suffering Shepherd.

Sometimes we romanticize what it was like during major times of crisis like the Great Depression and World War II. But I recently remembered a book called "The Grapes of Wrath" about the struggles of one family during the Great Depression. Sometimes human nature shows itself in ugly ways. And during difficult times, sometimes that comes out even more clearly. I think that is one of the themes of The Grapes of Wrath. A family from Oklahoma can't pay their bills. So the bank forces them to move. They hear about better

opportunities over in California. But the situation there isn't quite as rosy as they were led to believe. Getting work isn't easy. And when work comes, it doesn't always enable them to provide for their family very well because their employers take advantage of their desperate situation. Charging them for food and lodging and leaving them with very little left over.

Here's where Peter challenges us to think first with our Christian calling. When things get ugly, how can we show a clear contrast with the dominant attitudes in our world? When people turn cruel and start to take advantage of others, how can we be generous instead? Think first with an understanding of who we are by God's grace when we encounter difficulties and difficult people. Peter says: **"For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God."** (1 Peter 2:19) Peter then goes on to explain that it is a positive thing to be mistreated for doing the right thing.

Timeout. Rewind that a few seconds. Did Peter say it is good to suffer? And suffer when you haven't done anything wrong? If you started to zone out momentarily, that's exactly what Peter says. And there's more. In 1 Peter 2:18 Peter is actually talking to slaves who are aren't being treated fairly. And if that sounds extreme, we can go back to verse 13 where he says: **"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority."** And he explains why in verse 15: **"For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people."** Ugg. I feel like going on a Facebook rant right now about how unreasonable God's expectations are right now.

If you are like me, you are probably finding yourself getting more emotional as this pandemic drags on. It's hard to be calm. When we see ugliness and cruelty, it's hard not to respond. That's so much of what we see on social media today. Or even what we hear in conversations we have about what's going on. On one side, people are belittling anyone who doesn't listen to what the medical experts advise. On the other side, people are ready for open rebellion against oppressive government officials, calling them Nazis or communists. It's sometimes hard to tell if our public officials are overreacting or aren't taking the dangers seriously enough. But you are sure to find some extreme opinions.

And then it becomes personal. We have convinced ourselves that we are right. Any evidence that doesn't fit into the story we tell ourselves isn't just tossed aside, but villainized and ridiculed. We have a psychological need to feel like we matter. Outrage is the best way to scream to the rest of the world that our opinions are significant especially because we feel less significant. We feel so fearful that everything that's going on is so loaded down with importance because it matters ultimately. If everyone followed my advice or my solution, then things would turn out alright. Or maybe you don't have strong opinions on either side. But you are fearful because you aren't really sure what the truth is. You are just concerned about the heated rhetoric you hear from family and friends. You feel more confused because every bit of news seemed so politicized in our current cultural climate. Maybe you aren't even sure who is right. But the one thing you are sure about is you don't want to suffer any more than you have to.

So ask yourself where you are in these moments. Have you wandered away from your Shepherd?

There is a clear contrast between how we respond to a crises or accumulated, multiple crises stacked up on top of each other with the way Jesus handled himself. Peter highlights the unusual, even extreme ways Christians can handle hardships because we have our calling from Christ. He says: **“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”** (1 Peter 2:21) Here is the countercultural pattern shown by Jesus. Jesus never did anything wrong. He didn't use the ugly behaviors of people as an excuse to deviate from God's will. In fact, Peter reminds us: **“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.”** (1 Peter 2:23) Jesus overcame the human instinct to try to get even when abused and return abuse for abuse. Jesus experienced the worst kind of injustice when **“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross.”** (1 Peter 2:24) He suffered for the wrongs we have done. And he did all

You don't need a shepherd just to teach you how to behave better and treat people nicer. There is something more to your suffering Shepherd.

Jesus suffered outrage and indignation at the hand of people who were convinced they were right. People who viewed Jesus as an existential threat to their way of life. Jesus just had to be eliminated. And Jesus gave up his power on behalf of what was best for us. Jesus showed sacrificial love in the middle of that fear to show love to the loveless. Jesus took our sins upon himself. Jesus bore them as our sacrifice. Jesus took on himself all the ways in which we fail to hit the target of his example. Jesus took those sins so we can cease to exist for those sins. So that natural mentality that looks at people as enemies to our way of life and obstacles for our imagined utopia would be killed. Jesus went to the cross so we may live for righteousness.

You don't need a shepherd just to show you how to suffer. You have a shepherd to handle your deepest fears for you. By his unjust suffering and the way he handled all those hardships, Jesus was able to take away your fear of being taken advantage of. Jesus able to put to death the self-centeredness in your heart that stands as a barrier to carrying out your Christian calling. Jesus lowers the stakes for what is going in politics and public policy by giving you ultimate security under his grace. You live under the the Good Shepherd who takes personal responsibility for your ultimate welfare.

You do need a shepherd. You need a shepherd to give you safety. You need a shepherd to give you peace of mind. There is freedom under the suffering Shepherd. Under the watchful eye of Jesus, we can also entrust ourselves **“to him who judges justly.”** (1 Peter 2:23) Ultimately it doesn't matter what someone thinks about you or says on social media. You have someone more important to please with your life. So you have the confidence to stand firm in faith and carry out your Christian calling with boldness.

I'm always encouraged when I see celebrities organizing benefits. Concerts. Campaigns for food banks. Restaurants that go from just trying to survive to offering meals for health care

workers. If they are like the rest of us, they have gone through some steps to get there. First they are probably fearful. Then once they are secure they can start thinking of other people and organizing efforts to show generosity.

That's what our suffering Shepherd does for us. In this crisis, in any hardship you can think about where you are. After the initial panic or shock, remember you are with your Shepherd Jesus. With Jesus you have a life that is free from the fear of what you should face because of your pride, selfishness and ugliness toward others. And it's not just a matter that Jesus did all this for us and now all we have to do is be just like him. Actually, it is because he has given us absolute freedom that we can give our entire hearts and lives to him. We can be generous because of the certainty of our eternal destiny. We don't have to fear what will happen to us in this life because we are secure in our true home with Jesus. We can live each day being conscious of what God has done for us.

So where are you? Peter reminds God's people: **"For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."** (1 Peter 2:25) What helps you find out where you need to be? Less time in distractions and more time resting securely in your identity as a child of God. Less time on social media or email. More time focusing on the truth of God's Word. Minimizing staring at a screen and maximizing times sharing God's Word with friends.

I remember something else about that book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The message isn't just the ugliness of humanity in the face of hardships. It's also about how one family sticks together through it all. They hold onto their values. They even share what meager resources they have with others. God's people live securely under the suffering Shepherd. You know who you are. You know what the suffering of Jesus accomplished for you. You know sharing that security is more important than avoiding hardship or ridicule. Spreading the care of your Shepherd is a higher priority than proving you are right and showing everyone else how wrong they are. Actually the suffering Shepherd helps us see other people are just like us. They are also flawed people who don't have all the answers. They need grace. Just like you. They need life under the Shepherd. Under your Shepherd is exactly where you need to be. Amen.