***BLESSED IN SUFFERING?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

May 17, 2020

Texts: 1 Peter 3:8-18a and Proverbs 28:6

 Today marks two months since we last gathered as a congregation in this holy space to worship together. For some of you it may seem like two years, for others two weeks. So, how are you doing? Are you weathering the viral storm that is engulfing us all?

 Some of you seem to be surviving pretty well. As one person told me: for an introvert there are a lot worse things than being told to stay at home, read some good books, and binge watch some movies for a while! Maybe that worked for a week or two, but is it getting old now? Some of you seem to be engaging your pioneer spirit, boldly going where you have not gone before venturing into the world of technology or a new hobby or that junk closet you have avoided for years. Some of you have had your patience tested only to find that your patience is failing the test. Some of you are re-engaging with God; others are wondering if God is otherwise engaged. Many of you are suffering, if not from the virus itself, from the imposed isolation, the disruption to your routine, or the loss of time with people you love. How are you and your soul faring these pandemic days?

 On Palm Sunday 1994 a tornado destroyed a church in northeastern Alabama, toppling a wall onto the congregation and killing twenty people, including six children. Reflecting on that event for the *Gadsden Times*, Rick Braggs writes:

*This is a place where grandmothers hold babies on their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in the sky are holes in the floor of heaven. This is a place where the song “Jesus Loves Me” has rocked generations to sleep, and heaven is not a concept, but a destination. Yet in this place where many things, even storms, are viewed as God’s will, people strong in their faith and their children have died in, of all places, a church. The destruction of this little country church and the deaths – including the pastor’s vivacious 4-year old daughter – have shaken the faith of many people who live in this deeply religious corner of Alabama….It is not that it has turned them against God, only that it has hurt them in a place usually safe from hurt, like a bruise on the soul.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Is your soul bruised? Has it ever been so bruised – by a disaster, a death, a dire diagnosis, or perhaps this pandemic – events that shake your life, your confidence, and perhaps your faith? I suspect that COVID-19 is leaving a lot of bruised souls in its wake these days, inflicting holy hurt on folks who are anxious or suffering in the midst of this pandemic and wondering where God is in the midst of it all. As basketball coach Monty Williams described his struggles following the death of his wife: *My faith in God never wavered. Just, sometimes your faith and your feelings don’t line up.[[2]](#endnote-2)* How are they lining up for you these days?

 The churches to whom Peter was writing in the letter we read this morning were facing some of that disconnect between their faith and their feelings, though for some there was more than a little wavering. They were suffering, not from a pandemic or a death, but as the result of persecution or ridicule for trying to live faithfully as followers of the Way of Jesus. Many were struggling as they found their faith flimsy protection against the abuse of neighbors. They were trying to do the right thing as disciples of Jesus, but still they suffered – and somehow that didn’t seem right. The collision of faith and feelings was bruising their souls.

 The author of 1 Peter tries to offer a balm for their pain. He does not dismiss or play down their suffering, but encourages them to persevere in the face of it and do the right thing. “*Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse*,” he writes, “*but repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.*” In other words, be a blessing so that you may be blessed. Do the right thing and you will be blessed.

 “*Who will harm you if you are zealous to do what is right?*” he asks. The truth is: the list of those who will harm you is long. A lot of people out there will harm you for doing what is right!

Just ask the Freedom Riders who boarded buses in 1961 to fight segregation, young men and women, black and white, who were beaten at bus stops across the South just for riding the bus together.

Ask the Scottish missionaries who first arrived in Vanuatu to share the good news of Jesus Christ; after a long and arduous sea voyage, they had barely set foot on solid ground before they were killed and eaten by cannibals.

Ask Martin Luther King, Jr.

Ask Nelson Mandela.

Ask Joan of Arc who was burned at the stake, living into her own words:

 *One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.*

Ask the nurse who came down with COVID-19 because she cared for sick patients.

Ask the woman who was berated as a dupe of *fake news* for wearing a face covering at the 7-11.

Who will harm you if you are zealous to do what is right? There are a lot of folks out there who have no regard for the right you do or for you who do it, folks who will harm you with words or weapons or worse just for doing what is right. Yet again and again faithful people of God have chosen to do the right thing in defiance of those who would do them harm.

 To be a disciple of Jesus is to disregard those threats in order to do the right thing and follow where God leads. “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die*,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Are you willing to answer God’s call under those terms? Faithfulness is not always an easy path; sometimes the consequence of faithfulness is suffering. Are you willing to be faithful if faithfulness demands suffering of a sort, whether it be loss of your comforts, your riches, your freedom, or even your life?

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,”* says Jesus*, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”*

 *“Even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed,*” *writes* Peter.

Note that it is not just those who suffer or those who are persecuted who are blessed, but those who suffer or are persecuted for doing the right thing. Sometimes we bring suffering on ourselves for the bad choices we make. Some churches are jumping back into worship without taking any precautions to safeguard against COVID-19 on the misguided assumption that God will safeguard them from all harm, because worship is a good thing. Worshiping God is a good thing, but so too is protecting those who worship. A decision to boldly forego such care for one another risks significant suffering, and there is no blessing in that! Jesus and the writer in 1 Peter suggest that somehow in suffering for doing what is right, we are blessed, and we are charged with discerning the “right” and “good” thing.

 It seems an odd thing to say – in suffering you are blessed. Who wants to be so blessed? If you do the right thing, if you go out on a limb to do good and take a risk in order to be faithful, you ought to be blessed with some good thing like the prosperity gospels claim – do good and God will bless you with health and wealth and the *things* you want, do good and all people on earth will applaud. But the reality of faithfulness is that when you do the good thing God calls you to do, there is no divine guaranty against calamity. Sometimes you may be praised, and sometimes your soul may be bruised, and sometimes you may suffer in ways big or small; suffering may even be a direct result of the choice you make to be faithful. How then are you blessed in suffering for doing the right thing?

 You are blessed with God’s favor, blessed with those divine words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” You are blessed by the God who calls you to do the right thing in the first place, the God who sustains and redeems all things, including those who suffer. That is what the author of 1 Peter claims. You are blessed by a God who is well acquainted with suffering, a God who suffered for us. In Jesus Christ God has known human suffering and felt human pain beyond that which most of us will ever experience. Jesus knew the pain of nails on a cross, rejection, temptation, and abandonment. He knew what it was to do the right thing, the loving thing, and to suffer for it. And he urges us to follow his example and do the right thing in order to be a blessing to others, even if we suffer for it.

 On a daily basis each of us faces decisions between right and wrong. Those decisions have consequences and sometimes the consequence of choosing the right is inconvenient, annoying, or even painful – like being isolated in this pandemic or having to keep social distance or wearing an uncomfortable face covering or foregoing worship in person in order to keep others safe. But if it is the right thing to do in order to bless others, then we do it! As frustrating as it is, as impatient as we are, we do the right thing! *Choose the good*, writes Peter, *for even if you suffer, you will be blessed. Keep your conscience clear!* Someone has described your conscience as “*a mother-in-law whose visit never ends*.” Keeping your conscience clear is a blessing in and of itself! It is being able to look at yourself in the mirror without shame or regret at the decision you made, because you tried to do what was right! But is that enough for you? Is it enough to know that God will bless you somehow, somewhere, if you do the right thing? Is that enough to convince you to persevere faithfully in the midst of this pandemic?

 The blessing is rarely as tangible and immediate as the suffering. It is not as clear as the chocolate cake for dessert that offers the child an incentive to first eat the pickled Brussel sprouts. In a cost-benefit analysis, the cost of doing what is right is often high – sometimes painfully high. And there is no assurance that doing the right thing will necessarily keep you safe and well. Be a blessing anyway! Do the right thing anyway! “It is for this that you were called,” writes Peter, “that you might inherit a blessing!” And what is that blessing? God’s favor, but something more: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” says Jesus who was himself persecuted for righteousness’ sake, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” If Jesus could bear the cross for us, can we not bear a little longer the inconveniences and frustrations of this pandemic in order to be a blessing to others and to God? For in being that blessing, we are blessed with the kingdom of heaven! That should be enough to keep us keeping on faithfully - through this pandemic and beyond! Amen

1. Rick Braggs, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, pp.246-247 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Monty Williams quoted by Chris Ballard in “You Can’t Give In”, *Sports Illustrated*, April 10, 2017, p.78 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)