

Dealing with Suffering
Isaiah 53; 1 Peter 2:18-25 NRSV
West Valley Presbyterian Church
June 26, 2022

I'm sure that many of you know that reading stories to grandchildren is one of the most satisfying joys of life. Two of my grandchildren are old enough for stories, at ages 2 and 4. And one of their favorites is Going on a Bear Hunt. It's about a family that goes out for a walk, looking for a bear. They face all kinds of obstacles, ranging from tall grass to a snowstorm to a cave. And the refrain is always, "We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh, no! We have to go through it!"

I am reminded of that refrain in Peter's discussion of how to deal with unjust suffering. Last week, Pastor Morgan preached about how, as servants of God, we are free people; but that we are not to use that freedom as a pretext for evil. Freedom isn't all about me. Freedom isn't saying, "I can do whatever I want." Freedom is about the responsibilities that my rights give me. I hope you did what Pastor Morgan asked us to do last week: write down 10 rights that you have, and then write down your responsibilities that flow from those rights.

Peter said that we are to use our freedom to fear God first of all. That means that we are to love our fellow believers. And it also means that we are to respect those in authority over us. Even if they are not Christian. Even if they are actively persecuting Christians, which the emperor and the district governor were doing at the time. That is part of what it means to be servants of God who live as free people.

That brings us to the topic of unjust suffering. Peter continues with a specific example of being a servant of God who is suffering unjustly- namely, a Christian slave of a harsh master. Today we're continuing with Chapter 2; and we are going to look at verses 18-25.

SLIDE – 1 PETER 2:18-25

SLIDE – NATURAL, DESERVED, AND UNJUST SUFFERING

We all experience suffering of one sort or another while we live on this earth. Natural suffering is built into all of us. We have nerve endings! If I lean over a fence to pick up some garbage, and break three ribs, well, that's what I'd call natural suffering. It's built into creation for our own protection. Our nerves inform us of what is good for us and what is bad for us. If we do something that damages our bodies and it hurts, then we stop doing it, right? I won't be leaning over the fence any more. Natural suffering is a signal that's for our own good, however unpleasant it may be.

Then there's deserved suffering. In verse 20, Peter uses the example of a slave being beaten for doing something wrong, and says, "If you endure being beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that?" We don't hear that verse today as Peter's fellow Christians would have heard it. In Roman times slavery was commonplace, often temporary, and covered a range of work from galley slave to

teacher. Slavery was structurally more cruel in America; so we rightly still flinch when we hear Peter's comment. Perhaps we could better understand Peter's point if we think of a boss and an employee. Suppose an employee is embezzling from their company. The boss finds out, fires the employee, and takes him or her to court to set up a repayment plan. Would the employee suffer? Probably yes. But it would be deserved suffering, the consequence of bad behavior, and probably wouldn't gain a lot of sympathy.

And third, there's unjust suffering. That's what Peter is talking about in v. 18 when he says, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." I confess that my reaction to v. 18 is, "What? No! You shouldn't submit to a harsh master, that's not right!" Which of course just goes to show how much social situations have changed in the 2000 years since this letter was written. The slaves in the congregations that Peter wrote to, would have had to deal with even more unjust suffering if they'd tried to rebel. They would most likely have been crucified, or maybe sent to the galleys or the mines. Unjust suffering existed; and legally, there wasn't anything they could do about it short of purchasing their freedom.

SLIDE – 1 PETER 2:20-21

So what Peter was saying was, Unjust suffering exists. So here's how you deal with it. You can't go over it. You can't go under it. You have to go through it. And how do you do that? You follow Jesus' example. VV 20-21: "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."

SLIDE – WHY FOLLOW IN JESUS' FOOTSTEPS?

GRATITUDE
COMPANIONSHIP
SELF INTEREST
WITNESS

And why should we follow in Jesus' footsteps? Partly out of gratitude. We have ourselves been redeemed through Jesus' suffering for us. Peter continues, vv. 24-25, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that 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." If he was willing to redeem us at such a terrible cost, then surely we will be grateful and will want to be with him and will gladly go where he leads.

Partly out of the joy of Jesus' companionship, and the sense of being transformed day by day to become more like him. And of course the more like him we become, the more closely we will follow; and the more closely we follow, the more like him we become, and the more joyful we are. His joy becomes our joy.

Partly out of self-interest. If unbelieving masters or bosses can see the transformation that Jesus is making in the lives of their slaves, then perhaps they might want to find out more about Jesus. Perhaps they will also turn to Jesus and transfer their loyalty to him. And if they do that, then they become servants of God also, and stop using their freedom as a pretext for evil.

In the same way, if we show others the transformation that God is making in our lives by following in Jesus' footsteps, perhaps our non-verbal witness could make a difference in their lives. What we do can be a more effective witness than what we say. Maybe if others see how we react even when they are hassling us, maybe they too would turn towards God. We have seen examples of that, quite recently.

ANY PICTURE OF SELMA MARCH OR MARTIN LUTHER KING LEADING PROTESTERS?

Social situations have changed in 2000 years. But the fact that we Christians are servants of God, has not changed. The fact that unjust suffering still exists, has not changed. The fact that we all are faced with unjust suffering in our own lives, has not changed. And most of us have seen with our own eyes, the public power that following Jesus in enduring unjust suffering can have. Anyone here today who can remember seeing Rev. Martin Luther King on TV, or maybe even live? Back in 1956, towards the beginning of his public struggle for justice for African Americans, he preached, "I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may." (From a sermon preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 6, 1956.) MLK was not a perfect man. But he meant what he said, and he did strive to serve God, following in Jesus' footsteps, even in the midst of unjust suffering, throughout his life.

Peter wrote of Jesus, in vv 23, "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." That is how Jesus lived his whole life, no matter how much pain he endured. And you know what? We become more like the one whom we imitate. Following in Jesus' footsteps DOES help us grow to become more like him. And when Jesus' followers become more like him, that DOES still change the world. Now. Today. We saw it for ourselves in those protests that King led. We saw the crowds of marchers being abused, but not returning abuse. We saw brothers and sisters in Christ enduring unjust treatment, and entrusting themselves to the one who judges justly. King died far too young as a martyr; and equality before the law remains less than perfect. But can any of us doubt the power of what God did through his servants? Can any of us doubt the changes that came about? Can any of us who saw it, doubt that God can and does still act through people who follow in Jesus' footsteps? Can any of us doubt that we too are called to endure, without seeking vengeance, when we suffer unjustly?

I am sure that each and every one of us is familiar with suffering and acquainted with grief. Some of it may be helpful, as it's the body's warning system, such as the pain of breaking ribs. Some of it may be the natural consequences of our behavior- such as, if you embezzle from your employer, you are likely to get caught, punished, and have to repay what you stole. Some of it may be unjust,

such as, your grandchild was killed in a school shooting and you're howling with grief as your heart is torn apart. We live in a fallen world where there are such things as sin and evil, where our adversary the devil does prowl, as Peter puts it in Chapter 5. And when we are confronted with unjust suffering, we can't go over it. We can't go under it. We have to go through it.

PICTURE OF UVALDE, TEXAS

Time magazine recently interviewed Rev. Julian Moreno, who is a pastor in Uvalde, Texas, and the great grandfather of one of the children who was killed. And this is what he says: "Every fiber of my human emotions, in my mind, cries out to hate. To be angry. But then I remember that I have preached a number of times the words of Jesus. He said that we must learn to love our enemies. This experience has taught me to live those words." Following in Jesus' footsteps has made it possible to not return hatred for hatred. Following in Jesus' footsteps has made it possible for him to endure, and to go through suffering that we can't even begin to imagine.

If an abused slave can forgive his master and follow Jesus, then so can we. If a great grandfather can learn to love the teenager who killed his great granddaughter, and follow Jesus, then so can we. Whatever suffering we may face, now or in the future, whatever we have to go through, we can get through it with the strength that God gives us to follow Jesus. Perhaps, as we follow him and meet unjust suffering with mercy and love, perhaps we too will be blessed to see our own world change. Amen.