

May 31, 2020

"Simon Says: Suffer"

1 Peter 4:1-19

For weeks leading up to Easter, we walked with Simon Peter as he walked with Jesus. We saw what he did and didn't do; what he discovered about Jesus and was confused by; committed to and then backed out of; and then he was filled with "a living hope in the resurrected Jesus" (1 Peter 1:3) and everything changed. Now we're listening to what he said we should do.

[Read [1 Peter 4:1-19](#) from the NIV]

We're paying attention to what Simon Said. These words are written toward the end of his life, before he was martyred as a follower of Christ. And it's his own suffering that adds to his credibility when Simon Says: Suffer. What does Peter mean when he calls us to suffer? What is the suffering he keeps referring to throughout this letter and really focuses on in chapter 4? What does it look and feel like? And why would anyone want to embrace suffering?

Here's a little quiz about suffering to get us started. When Peter says suffering is helpful in shaping us to be like Christ and training us to be more holy and less sinful (1 Peter 4:1), which of the following would fit his definition of suffering?

- a. Not finding a parking place
- b. Feeling achy in the morning after a strenuous hike in the Monument
- c. Having a lot of homework AND too many chores
- d. Not getting a stimulus check in a timely manner
- e. Struggling with wi-fi that keeps going out while everyone works/takes classes online
- f. Being unsuccessful in finding and purchasing toilet paper

[Should I go on?]

We throw the term "suffering" around far too easily (suffering through homework, slow wi-fi, deliveries that take SOOOO long - what did we ever do before Amazon Prime? - and not finding what we need in the grocery store), and it cheapens the word. Peter would have none of our whininess and pettiness. I've noticed a smidgen of self-awareness growing among us in the expression "first-world problems." It's a small step in the direction of admitting that, in so many ways, we don't know the first thing about the suffering Simon Says we should expect and welcome.

There IS a lot of real suffering people experience that shouldn't be minimized or shrugged off: Cancer and other health problems, unemployment and financial meltdowns, estranged family relationships, the scourge and multiplicity of addictions plaguing our society, natural disasters, loss of a loved one, chronic depression, and the list goes on. All of this is real. All of this is

painful. And all of this leads to a form of suffering. But that isn't what Peter is referring to when he calls us to suffer; which means we have to be careful not to slap what Simon Says here onto someone else's suffering of a different kind. I will not get on my soapbox about this, but it's one of the things the Church does to its own demise AND to the detriment of our gospel-mission to the world (we slap Bible verses onto every instance of suffering). Using verses from 1 Peter about suffering in a sympathy card to a friend battling cancer or facing unemployment doesn't point them to a living hope in the resurrected Jesus. It mostly confuses them, and feels like we are minimizing their pain. Did that feel like I was on a soapbox? If so, I should get off of it and talk about the kind of suffering that DOES point people to Jesus and bring glory to God, every time – whether they choose to follow and worship or not is their choice.

In last week's passage, Simon Said, "It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit." (1 Peter 3:17-18) Now in chapter 4 Peter goes on, "Therefore, [there's that practical word of Peter's] since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude." (1 Peter 4:1)

The kind of suffering Peter is encouraging must stem from a mindset that's like the mind of Jesus; sacrificial and redemptive. There's no glory in suffering for the sake of suffering. Biblical suffering is not masochism, nor should it be embraced as a way to flash spiritual merit badges. Jesus laid aside all rights and privileges of the good and safe life for the sake of others; and so must we – if, like Peter, we're going to fully follow Him.

It's not that other forms of suffering can't be used by God to help shape us and deepen our trust in Him. It's not that facing physical or emotional or financial suffering with courage and faith isn't a great witness to the resurrection power of Christ. It is! It's just that Peter (Simon) is talking about suffering that comes from living a counter-cultural life in obedience to the King of a new Kingdom. And in that Kingdom a few things are true: 1) prayerful sacrifice for the sake of others is embraced, 2) a holy and self-controlled life for the glory of God is demonstrated, and 3) practical decisions are made about how we express love to others, show hospitality to strangers, and exercise our gifts for the good of the whole (these are some of the specific things Peter lists in 1 Peter 4:7-11). The suffering that Simon is talking about is part-and-parcel of the "holy" and "set apart/distinct" life he calls us to earlier in his letter.

Peter's been hinting at a life that embraces suffering. He's laid the groundwork by lifting up the suffering Jesus endured for all of humanity. And now he invites us to follow the way of the Suffering Servant. We might be mocked by others for saying "no thank you" to the self-indulgent life style Peter lists out in verses 3-4. We might be called a goody-good or old-fashioned – or worse. [By the way, the Greco-Roman lifestyle 2,000 years ago was every bit as self-indulgent as our modern world.] We might find ourselves being labeled or shunned when

we "love others deeply" (1 Peter 4:8) – when we love people our friends and family deem unworthy of love. We might be misunderstood when we "administer God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). But we will also be imitating Jesus and demonstrating to others that there is a Kingdom that has arrived . . . "on earth as it is in heaven."

Peter goes on in his letter and tells us to expect suffering; again not the suffering that comes with cancer but the kind that comes from living the Jesus Life. He says, "Don't be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ . . . if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed." (1 Peter 4:13-14) In other words, when you are being persecuted or ostracized for being like Jesus, don't be surprised and don't run from it. [By the way, notice that I said persecuted for being like Jesus – and not for being a jerk. See Jason's sermon from last week if you missed it.] And this isn't just Peter who says we shouldn't run from this kind of suffering. Jesus Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10)

I know very few people, personally, who are persecuted because of righteousness and justice. Do you? Why is that and what might we do to change that? [It would be good to expose ourselves to more and learn about the Persecuted Church and read the stories of those martyred and persecuted followers of Jesus; for example, read a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.]

A lot of people are suffering through this global pandemic. There is isolation that is growing and depression that is deepening. Uncertainty has some on edge. Fear is not diminishing. We're also suffering as we watch this medical issue become a political one; that's painful too. But it's not the suffering Peter is writing about.

A lot of people do suffer for their faith in Jesus every day, in ways we can't even imagine. They are suffering because of evil and injustice. And though that's not our story, we can pray more and give more to those who are suffering and in need. We can pray more and find ways to support mission and ministry that is sacrificial and redemptive. It might mean we do with a little less for ourselves; which might even 'pinch a little.' That's not suffering; but it's sacrificing. And a sacrificial mindset is the mindset of Christ . . . and a great place to start for preparing to embrace and enter into suffering because of our faith.

As we are "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others," we will become less self-centered (and less "tyrannized by what we want" as Peterson translates verse 1). We will become less suffering-averse. We will be more willing to enter the suffering of others. And if, as a result of living a humble and holy/set apart life, we actually suffer some for following Jesus, we might even experience the truth of this passage and the reality that we are

"participating in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 4:13) and actually "praise God that we bear [His] name." (1 Peter 4:16)

This sacrificial and redemptive life will be attractive to some; and ludicrous to others – almost laughable. But that's part of the gig of letting Jesus run our lives. There may come a day when we are truly persecuted for our faith – in a way similar to first century Christians. Until then, we should remember that this kind of suffering happens every day for millions of Christians in our modern world. Though we should be grateful that we get to freely follow Jesus in America, we can do what Simon says: "Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray." (1 Peter 4:7) We can quit numbing ourselves with Netflix or pornography, overeating or overworking, shopping or social media just to avoid thinking about the suffering of others. And with that extra time and clear mindedness we can enter into prayer on their behalf. I'm grateful that Jason led us in a Prayer for the Persecuted Church. We can also offer hospitality to others – in various forms – even if it makes us uncomfortable and inconvenienced.

[The sacrifices we are making now - because of COVID-19 - and will need to make in the coming days will also help us embrace the sacrificial mindset of Jesus, as we put aside our own ideas and opinions to do whatever it takes to begin gathering safely in worship again.]

All of this 'suffering with and for others' (some of it in line with the kind of suffering Peter writes about and some of it of other varieties) might get us closer to the sacrificial and redemptive life of Jesus – who laid it all on the line for us. And that's the real focus of our life together. It's not about us. It's about Him; the One who (in the Garden of Gethsemane) said to His Father, "Not My will, but Your will be done." And, as Peter says at the end of verse 11, "To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."