

The 6th Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2020

The Lessons: Acts 17:16-31
 Psalm 66:8-20
 1 Peter 3:13-22
 John 14:15-21

The Hymns: # 490 *Jesus Lives! The Victory's Won*
 # 616 *Baptismal Waters Cover Me*
 # 594 *God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It*

The Collect: O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon: Suffering and Witnessing (1 Peter 3:13-22)

The Word of the Lord from 1 Peter 3: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

For the past few weeks we have been looking at the first Epistle of St. Peter in our sermons. In today's lesson Peter brings together two favorite topics for Christians: suffering and witnessing. Maybe "favorite" is the wrong word, and maybe many Christians would say that suffering and witnessing often feel like synonyms to them. But as we look at today's text, I would suggest that if you know what to tell yourself when you must undergo suffering, then you know what to say to others, too.

Just as he did in our epistle reading a couple of weeks ago, Peter returns to the topic of suffering. He asks, "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" There is a command in there: you are supposed to be zealous for what is good. Let's put it this way: the Lord has given you the privilege of speaking His Word, His Law and Gospel, to dying people in a dying world. Apart from Him, there is no salvation. His Law identifies what is good: therefore, you speak out for what is good, because you have the opportunity to say what God says. As people hear that and are convicted of their sin, then you have the opportunity to speak the Gospel so that they might hear of Christ's grace. And, as more and more people advocate God's Law, the world is a better place to live.

Now, who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? The answer is, "people who don't repent of their sin," and who therefore are zealous for what is not good. Sadly, there's plenty

of them to go around these days: as our society departs further from God's Word, it advocates all sorts of doctrines and practices that violate God's Law and seek to suppress the Gospel. It's not enough for Christians to avoid the bad and be quiet about the good: Christian love compels us to speak the truth. And even if it's not other people who oppress us, the devil will do what he can to inflict harm and make you suffer for what is good.

Peter goes on:

"But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

So when you suffer, you honor Christ the Lord by being able to give an answer—make a defense—to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. This is an interesting portrayal of witnessing: it doesn't have you going door to door, talking to complete strangers who know nothing of you and your situation, nor you of them. There's a context: you're living as a Christian, enduring some hardship, and somebody asks you why you are living the way you do. Why aren't you hopeless or bitter or vengeful or silenced? Why do you stick with the faith? The Lord uses the situation to raise the questions so that you might honor Him by speaking His Word. You don't necessarily start the conversation: people come to you. It may be the one inflicting the suffering. More probably, it's the bystander who may well be suffering too, but without any hope. Why do you have hope? Can you give a defense? Can you give the reason for your hope?

But before you get to the answer and the hope, note that Peter says to speak it with gentleness and respect. When you're suffering, and especially when suffering is being inflicted upon you, it's easy to speak the truth out of anger, out of self-justification or self-pity, with only contempt for others. But your goal in speaking is not to win the argument: your hope in speaking is that those who hear might repent of their sin and believe in Jesus Christ. Your angry words are the venting of a sinner, but your proclamation of the answer is the Gospel which the Holy Spirit uses to give faith and forgiveness, life and salvation.

So what's your answer? What's your defense for holding to the good, even if it means suffering for it? There's more than one way to say it, and Peter gives one version with these rich words:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him."

There's a ton of comfort in this defense, so let's look at the highlights.

Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God. When the text says “once,” the meaning is “once for all.” Christ has suffered for all the sins of all the world for all time. As the righteous Son of God, He did this for the unrighteous. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Why is this the answer? Because the one who is suffering hardship is always tempted to think that God is angry, out to get him. He’s often haunted with the thought that he’s being punished for his sin. The truth that Christ suffered once for all for sins is a huge comfort, because it means that God isn’t out to get you for your sin, because He already “got” His Son for your sin on the cross. There are still hardships and times of suffering in this sinful world, but they are not a testimony that God is out to make you miserable until He finally throws you away: No! even in the midst of suffering, you cling to the truth that Christ suffered for your sin to bring you to God.

Peter goes on to say that when Christ suffered once for sins, He was “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit.” His suffering was complete: He suffered the ultimate wages of sin, namely death. The price for sin has been paid in full. As a Christian, the Gospel isn’t just news that Jesus’ cross merely alleviates suffering or means it easier for you to get back on God’s good side. Rather, Christ has died and Christ is risen again from the dead. The price is fully paid, and He promises deliverance and eternal life for free.

Made alive by the Spirit, Christ descended into hell to proclaim to the spirits in prison. He didn’t descend into hell to suffer more: He suffered hell on the cross as He endured His Father forsaking Him. So why did He descend into hell? For you. You know that the victory is complete when the king walks into his enemy’s palace, sits on that throne, starts making proclamations—and nobody stops him. Jesus descended into hell to proclaim His victory. The proclamation was not for the spirits who are there: they didn’t want to hear it. No, the proclamation is for you. See, when somebody is suffering, another common temptation is to believe that, even if He wants to help, the Lord is too weak to completely overcome the problem, that the devil still has a serious amount of power. But Christ says to you, “I’m not too weak. My victory was complete! I marched into hell to proclaim My victory over sin, death and devil, and nobody could stop Me! Then I left—and nobody could keep Me from leaving!” How complete is Jesus’ victory and the devil’s defeat? Christ has been to hell and back for you, so that you can be sure He will deliver you.

About those spirits in prison...Peter says that “they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.” There’s some strange comfort in suffering: why does the Lord permit suffering to continue? Because He is patient, and He patiently gives more time for people to hear His Word, repent of their sin and believe in Him. While that time continues, it may seem to the people of God that He’s forgotten them. It is not so: in the days of Noah, the number of believers was only eight, but they were not forgotten. The Lord delivered them even while the rest of mankind perished. The Lord will deliver you, too.

Why does Peter go back to the Flood in the days of Noah? To tell you how all of these blessings are yours. Jesus won forgiveness and deliverance for you at the cross, but you can’t travel back in time to get these gifts—so He brings them to you. How? Baptism.

Peter writes: “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who

has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him."

Your baptism didn't just wash off whatever dirt was on your forehead. It saved you, because it delivered to you the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross. By water and the Word, Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection. You've already died to sin. You already have eternal life. You live as a holy child of God, who sees you as one with a good conscience: while it may not be clean of memories of sin, it is good because you no longer fear God—because your sins are taken away. All of this is yours for the sake of Jesus, who sits at the right hand of the Father. He rules over angels, authorities and powers—His Word cannot be overruled, and His reign will not end. Therefore, when you're suffering, it's good to make the sign of the cross and say, "I am baptized." That is to say, "I am not forsaken by God. I may not know why this is happening or how long it will last, but I do know that I am the Lord's, because He's made me His by baptism and He tells me He will deliver me."

That's the comfort you have when you suffer. That's the comfort that many would love to have when they suffer too. Many of our members here, when they are brought low by affliction or grief, have said, "I don't know how people could endure this without the Lord." This is the hope that you have for yourself—and this is the defense you can give to others. As long as there's sin and evil, there will be suffering, but you are not forsaken. Christ has suffered for sins once for all. He tells you that you are righteous. He tells you that you have life in Him. He reminds you that you are baptized and He will not forsake you. All of this is His free gift to you, for He's done all the work. Do not fear and do not be troubled, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen