

He Cares for You

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

For the most part, we who hear or read this scripture have never suffered, truly suffered, because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Except for rare and isolated examples, those of us in the United States are allowed to practice religion without oppression. This freedom is written into the very document around which the country was founded and from which it still governs itself. This was not the case for people in every country around the world.

So we must ask whether this text is pertinent to the majority of us who have not suffered for our faith. Is this text speaking only to those who have been oppressed, beaten, or expelled for their faith? If the answer to this question is yes, then we would have little need for a sermon. However, many think the answer is no. Our scripture is not addressed only to those who have literally suffered for their faith, but is speaking to all Christians.

Whether referring to persecution or to the more common distresses and frustrations we all feel every day, the point is that as Christians we are not flying solo; God cares for us, and we are to care for each other. In other words, the Christian faith is not individualistic. It is not solely about my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our personal relationship to Christ, for sure is important, but at its core, Christianity invites people to become part of one body of Christ, which is larger than the troubles, successes, or frustrations of any one person. Too often, Christianity is reduced to the singular; as if about me, my family, my loved ones, my situation. Too often, faith is focused on one's personal relationship with Jesus and little else. Our scripture reminds us that as Christians we are a part of the whole. Others

through the ages have pressed the importance of this lesson. John Donne wrote in his "Meditation XVII" that "no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted Donne in his sermon at the Temple Israel in Hollywood on February 26, 1965, to underscore this point that we do not exist merely for our own needs.

This awareness is essential to our ability to relate to others and the needs they have or particular troubles they face. The ability to empathize, to achieve solidarity, and to find common ground ultimately stems from an understanding of one's self as part of a larger whole. The further removed we are from this understanding, the less able we are to engage the world in Christlike love, the very essence of which is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This can be successful only if we understand our own existence to be intricately tied to and part of the existence of our neighbor. **Gordon McClellan**

Today is the last Sunday of Easter for this church year. First Peter reminded his readers that Christ suffered; therefore, they should not be surprised when Christians also suffer. But Christians should not suffer for wrongdoings; we suffer for doing what is right, resting in the assurance that God's glory will be revealed as we live in community and knowing that God cares for us. In a strange twist, to be reviled by this world for the sake of Christ is to be considered a blessing. We Christians are not to be anxious, for God cares. We are to be watchful and resist evil, lest we become complicit with the powers and principalities of this world (Eph. 6:12).

In this letter Peter attempts to provide comfort and reassurance for those who face, or will be facing, persecution due to their commitment in following Jesus. We Euro-Americans have assumed that the cause of the

hostility toward the early church was what they believed. However, Empire seldom cares what the masses believe, as long as allegiances to the ruling elites are not compromised. The early churches were persecuted not for what they *believed*, but for what they *did*. They preached a message of liberation. To preach good news to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, sight for those blinded, and liberation to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19) is to reject conformity with the prevailing power structures. To live the gospel is threatening and liberation for the oppressed is a direct assault on the forms of subjugation society has legitimized.

The hostility provoked by the early church, or any other church that radically lives the gospel, should not be surprising. Those whom society benefits employ whatever means necessary to protect and expand their power and privilege. The threat to the Empire was not that this group of Christians believed Jesus was the Son of God or that he rose from the dead. The threat was that Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord. Could it be that today's church has become irrelevant because we have traded the gospel message of liberation for conformity and complicity with empire? Our churches need to be places with less emphasis on correct doctrine and more on correct action. I wonder, would our efforts to bring about justice provoke persecution?

We may be willing to offer charity, but few are willing to take a role in dismantling the very global structures designed to privilege us at the expense of others. Few of us are willing to experience the wrath of the very power structures designed to privilege us, if we attempt actually to dismantle those structures for the sake of Christ and justice. If we are truly concerned about our brothers and sister, we will not just talk about optimism, but work to dismantle the powers that keep our brothers and sisters, their children, and

their children's children in continuous lives of suffering and ever-expanding poverty.

Our fear of suffering and persecution is never an excuse to do nothing. The disenfranchised have no options but to continue their struggle for justice. While we insist on social order, marginalized communities call for social disorder. Perhaps such disorder might lead some within the dominant culture to share in the actions of overcoming the global forces of oppression. If so, it will be the only way that progress is made. This can be frightening to those who are accustomed to our power and privilege. **Miguel A. De La Torre**

A man named Benyamin Yusuf experienced brutal persecution for his choice of religion. He was raised in Africa by a strict Muslim family. When he decided to become Christian, his father disowned him and banished him from their home. Benyamin decided to leave his native land for a more tolerant society. His feet being his only means of transportation, he began walking to the border. Along the way, he was captured and put in prison. The prison guards spent every night for several months trying to beat a renunciation out of him. Benyamin never renounced his faith. Instead, he would forgive the guards at the conclusion of every beating.

One of the jailers became intrigued by Benyamin, who offered such love in the face of such cruelty. One night, after a particularly vicious beating, the jailer came to the cell to ask Benyamin why he forgave him and the other guards after every beating. Benyamin told the guard about Jesus and the lessons of selfless love and forgiveness he taught. The guard left in disbelief, but returned much later that night with the surprise announcement that he had come to help Benyamin escape. Escape he did, eventually making his

way to the United States, where he earned a PhD in religious studies before returning to Africa to plant churches.

This story reminds us that people suffer for their faith, even in our modern world. The greatest form of violence is to separate people from one another—for people to forget or abandon this notion of our connectionality, of being united with all Christians around the world in our struggles, triumphs, joys, and fears. So to forget would be to sever the most important tie that binds people of faith together in the commitment to love one another as Christ loved.

It is imperative that the differences that exist between Christians not be allowed to sever the connectionality that we have in Christ. **Gordon McClellan**

In the face of suffering and persecution, Peter told the faithful to cling in hope to God's promised good. We are to act humbly, acknowledging the power and providence of God, for he cares for us. We are to act watchfully, disciplined enough not to doze off in the face of impending danger for he cares for you. We are to act faithfully, by resisting the evil one and those who follow in his entourage, for he cares for us.

The primary comfort that the epistle provides for those who suffer is the comfort of God's present grace and eventual triumph. There is, however, also a secondary comfort. The care that these believers share with Christ is echoed in the care they share with their fellow Christians, who also suffered. First Peter calls upon the faithful to "resist," by reminding us that we are part of a community that extends far beyond our own communities and reaches all the world (5:9).

Appropriately the promise of God's triumph over the forces of evil and care for us moves us to sing with our ancient brothers and sisters: "To him be the power forever and ever. Amen" (5:11). **David L. Bartlett**

We are God's Easter people and he cares for us!

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