

## Scripture Reading

### 1 Peter 4:12-19

<sup>12</sup> Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. <sup>15</sup> If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. <sup>16</sup> However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. <sup>17</sup> For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? <sup>18</sup> And,

"If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

<sup>19</sup> So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

### 1 Peter 5:1-11

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. <sup>5</sup> In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,

"God opposes the proud  
but shows favor to the humble."

<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. <sup>7</sup> Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

<sup>8</sup> Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

<sup>10</sup> And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

<sup>11</sup> To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

**Morning Message**  
***Koinonia & Suffering***

There is an elephant in the room!

There is something in our midst we don't want to acknowledge,  
much less talk about.

The elephant in the room, is called suffering.

One of the reasons we don't talk about it, is because we want people to feel welcomed here. We want them to hear the Gospel and accept the good news that God's love & salvation have come to us in Jesus Christ.

We want to attract people to Christ, not scare them away. And so we don't talk too much about the elephant named "Suffering".

Frequently pastors and evangelists share with seekers the blessings of living in a relationship with God. We talk about

- God's unconditional love,
- God's faithful promises;
- we talk about heaven,
- we talk about eternal life where sickness, sadness and tears are non-existent.
- We talk about God's grace and his free gift of new life in Christ,

...and then after all those descriptions of God's blessings we usually ask,

"Now, do you know of any reason not to accept God's salvation in Christ?"

We don't talk about the elephant in the room because it might give

someone a reason! We don't talk about suffering because one of the very practical and painful truths about following Christ is that while we will experience great joy and discover purpose for life, we will also suffer as we follow Christ.

There is an elephant in the room because Jesus told his disciples:

**Matthew 16:24**

*...“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.*

And we know what that cross means. Before us today we have the broken body of Christ, and His shed blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus' cross meant his suffering. What do you imagine our crosses means?

There is an elephant in the room, and it tells us that when we follow Christ we too will experience suffering.

Did you know that, when you first decided to follow Jesus?

Peter wrote and we need to hear the truth:

<sup>12</sup> *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

Today I want to acknowledge that suffering for Christ happens, but through the blessing of *koinonia*, God's intimate spirit-directed fellowship, we can support one another through the sufferings we're called to endure as followers of Christ.

The scriptures remind us that as one Body, with Christ as our head, we

rejoice together and we mourn together. Together we grow and together we suffer. But as we suffer, we help one other to endure any suffering asked of us by God. And we do that through a *koinonia* that keeps our focus upon God while still dealing with the reality of suffering. It does that in a number of ways:

### **1. Koinonia offers a consistently accurate scriptural perspective on suffering.**

When you think about suffering, do you realize that there are different kinds of suffering? Peter writes:

#### **1 Peter 4**

*<sup>14</sup> If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. <sup>15</sup> If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.*

*<sup>16</sup> However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

Because of this truth about suffering, we can say that suffering is not something Christians should look for, though there are many Christians and non-Christians who choose suffering as part of their identity. Their suffering may be due to criminal actions, or simple foolishness. People might suffer because of laziness or because greed has caused them to overspend and now they suffer under a burden of debt. This is not suffering for Christ!

There is that kind of “manmade suffering” in this world, but then there is *suffering for Christ; where obedience to God takes us to a cross that we must carry; a suffering that ultimately leads us to joy.*

We saw an early example of this suffering for Christ in the early church

after Peter and the other Apostles had been jailed and flogged for proclaiming Jesus in Jerusalem:

### **Acts 5:41**

*<sup>41</sup> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

The *koinonia* in that early Christian fellowship kept their focus on God while still dealing with the reality of suffering.

That same *koinonia* also reminds us today that

**2. While manmade suffering leaves us miserable, suffering for Christ eventually leads to joy because God-ordained suffering accomplishes a purpose.**

I once heard another preacher say, and I've found it to be so true, that mature Christians are never the ones who, when faced with suffering, ask "Why? Why God?" Rather, they ask "How?"; "How can I face this suffering for Your glory, O God?"

When I first heard that, I was convicted; remembering the countless times I've asked "Why God?" over the years. I was convicted of the shallowness of my trust in God.

For when we suffer for Christ we become part of God's great plan of redemption and reconciliation. When we suffer for righteousness sake, our suffering will be used by God to advance His Kingdom. For example, suffering often advances God's agenda of justice and mercy. On this All Saints' Sunday we cannot help but look back on the life of people like Martin Luther King Jr. and remember not only his sufferings & even his

death, but we can now see what God did through his obedience.

*Just as God accomplish His salvation through the suffering of his Son, God accomplishes his great purposes through others willing to take up their crosses.*

Tragedy & suffering without purpose is a horrible thing, but when we able to understand that our suffering for Christ has purpose one can find endurance, and there is a joy waiting for us at the end of the road.

As we live in *koinonia*, guided by God's Word and Spirit, we help each other to keep our focus on God's Kingdom and His purposes.

Through Christian *koinonia* we also remind one another, amid our sufferings, that

**3. God-ordained suffering not only finds its purpose in the world, but also within us, as God transforms us through suffering.**

This morning we've heard stories coming from our recent Common Cathedral experience.

In obedience to God's Word our Mission Commission helped us to feed hungry people.

- It cost us time and money.
- It meant that some people missing worship to drive into Boston and get cold on the Boston Common.
- It took planning, and worrying over food, logistics and safety.

Compared to the suffering of other Christians around the world it was nothing, but it was still suffering for Christ.

And what happened?

More than twenty Community Covenanters were transformed. Parents & kids, in big ways and in small ways, were changed by the people they met, the work they did, and the stories they heard. One woman came home telling me she wanted to do it every Sunday!

My understanding of the Common Cathedral ministry is that it began in Boston and is now in other cities; it began with one businesswoman's heart for the homeless; a passion that sent her to seminary and caused her to identifying the homeless as her parish. Talk about personal transformation!

Scripture tells us that:

### **John 1:12**

*... to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name,  
he gave the right to become children of God*

When we suffer for God, internal transformations push us toward that “becoming”. The writer of the NT book of Hebrews interestingly points to Jesus as an example of this very dynamic.

As we affirm Jesus to be both fully divine and fully human, scripture tells us that:

### **Hebrews 5:7-9**

*<sup>7</sup> During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. <sup>8</sup> Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered <sup>9</sup> and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..*

Jesus modeled godly suffering and transformation! What an example for us; and how wonderful it is that today have brothers and sisters in the faith walking with us through our transformations; encouraging and pointing us to the truth that

### **2 Corinthians 5:17**

*...if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:*

*The old has gone, the new is here!*

Koinonia addresses Christian suffering by giving us perspective and purpose (God is transforming the world and us through suffering).

Koinonia also helps us deal with suffering, as

#### **4. Koinonia reminds us to live in God's time**

The Apostle Peter began his first letter reminding his readers of the great promises of God for their eternity. Then he writes:

### **1 Peter 1:6**

*<sup>6</sup> In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*

Then, at the end of that same letter he writes:

### **1 Peter 5:10**

*<sup>10</sup> And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.*

When we, with the support of Christian brothers & sisters, are able to keep our eyes on God and the things of God, glancing rarely at our circumstances and sufferings, we get a very different perspective on time. For what might be life-long suffering for one person focused only on this life would only be “a little while” for someone anticipating an eternity in heaven.

In reality, the suffering is the same, but with friends who walk with you throughout life, who share your burdens, and help keep things in perspective, suffering diminishes and joy multiplies.

In the end, we will be blessed as a congregation if we can embrace what scripture teaches us about suffering; a lesson well-summarized by Oswald Chambers:

*Choosing to suffer means that there must be something wrong with you, but choosing God's will— even if it means you will suffer— is something very different. No normal, healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he simply chooses God's will, just as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not. And no saint should ever dare to interfere with the lesson of suffering being taught in another saint's life.* Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest

Wang Zhiming was born in Wuding, China in 1907, and came to faith through the missionary efforts of the 1940's and 50's. Zhiming became a Christian leader and was ordained in 1951. Because of his Christian stances against government policy, he was labeled as “counter-revolutionary” even before the Cultural Revolution under Mao took full power.

From 1966-76 the Cultural Revolution imprisoned 21 Christian leaders in Wuding. Zhiming and his family were arrested in '69. Prisoners were sent to camps, denounced and beaten. Forced to kneel on sharp stone rubble, beatings were often bloody, especially if a person collapsed; merciless beatings followed those who fell. And then when Christians refused to salute Chairman Mao's picture the beatings continued.

It was on December 29, 1973 as the Cultural Revolution was fading, Zhiming was executed in front of 10,000 people, many of whom were Christians, in the hope that fear would grip any willing to follow Christ's way. But it didn't. In fact, the great suffering of Wang Zhiming and other Christians cause the Church to grow.

- When Zhiming was arrested there were less than 3,000 Christians in Wuding.
- Six years after his death there were 12,000.
- Today, 30,000 Christians live in Wuding; attending 100 churches.

Today if you were to visit London's Westminster Abby and looked above the Great West Door, you would find 10 statues of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian martyrs, the deadliest of all centuries for Christians; including statues of Martin Luther King Junior & Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And in line with them is Wang Zhiming.

It is reported that despite church growth, persecution in Wuding, China continues, which only means that suffering continues as saints like Wang Zhiming continue to serve God and advance his Kingdom.

Today, I am not calling anyone to go out and look for suffering. But when obedience to God means suffering, do not retreat. Rather, face your suffering and be honored. And find within the Church that blessed *Koinonia* to support and sustain you through your suffering.

- Share your sorrows even as you share your joys,
- Receive scriptural encouragement  
as sisters and brothers remind you of God's promises,
- Remember that there is always purpose  
when we suffer for Christ, and
- Remember that our "light & momentary troubles are achieving for us  
an eternal glory that far outweighs them all". (2 Corinthians 4:17)

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