

Sermon for May 24, 2020

## Because of Him

I Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11

Our Scripture this morning begins with the word, “Beloved.” If we ever use that word today it is used for our most intimate relationships – the people we love the most.

This reminds me that all of the New Testament books and letters are really messages of love to us. So this section of the Word of God begins with a pointed note of love and compassion.

Through Peter the Lord is saying, ‘To you whom I love – I don’t want you to be surprised if you face all kinds of troubles and you suffer. He uses the word “fiery trial.” Surely Peter had in mind what had taken place while he wrote I Peter. Nero was Cesar and Rome experienced a devastating fire that destroyed much of the city. Nero, who murdered his own mother, was a paranoid and violent character. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero accused Christians of starting the fire to remove suspicion from himself. According to his account many, many Christians were rounded up and brutally executed, “being thrown to the beasts, crucified and being burned alive.” The popular legend has it that Nero played the fiddle while Rome burned.

Today perhaps the greatest objection to Christianity is this: Why would a loving God allow pain and suffering to happen to so-called good people or innocent children? If He is all-powerful and all-loving, why doesn’t He stop it?

Long ago there was a comedian named Bob Hope. Once upon receiving a major award for entertaining our troops he responded: “I don’t deserve this, but then again I have arthritis and I don’t deserve that either.”

In our comfort loving country many false expectations and false ideas have arisen about being a Christian. Try some of these on:

- True Christians always have better marriages.

- True Christians have less pain in their lives because Christ is with them.
- True Christians are wealthier than non-Christians.
- True Christians don't get discouraged.
- True Christians no longer struggle with sin, doubt, and fear.
- True Christians don't need medications because God will heal them.
- True Christians are always motivated to pray, serve and love.

None of these are true. What is true is that true Christians don't escape reality but instead come together to face reality. In repentance and striving they encourage on another, and clinging to Jesus find hope and joy in being connected to Him.

The Scriptures come at us with truth and reality. We live in a fallen world, a world in rebellion against God and the slavery of sin remains supreme in the majority of people. All of us – yes even Christians – have made a mess of this world bringing hatred, violence, greed and immorality.

But into this fallen world a Savior has come to liberate us, to bring us back to God, to love, peace and goodness. That of course is Jesus Christ.

The second major reality is that we who believe follow a Crucified Savior. We don't follow some triumphant general or some uber popular celebrity. No, we follow the humble Galilean who didn't stray from the path to the cross.

Jesus told us flatly: In this world you are going to have trouble. He told us, If the world hates you, remember it hated Me first.

He also said (Matthew 10:24ff) "A student is not above his teacher nor a servant above his master...If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub how much more the members of his household."

If we are "in Christ," then we can expect to share in some of the things that Jesus experienced. But let's face it, our lives are a whole lot easier than His in every way. So if we face some push back, mockery, or hostility for being Christians – what is that?

Now faith is a gift and Jesus' death on the cross is a finished work – our good works add nothing to our salvation. But part of this great gift, this salvation, is our determination now to live a Christian life.

There is one great fact to keep in mind about living the Christian life: It is hard!

The reason that it is hard is that we still struggle with sin. If you say you have no sin, you deceive yourself and the truth is not in you, says the Word of God. Paul in Romans 7 writes: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do – I do not do, but what I hate to do...I have a desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out."

I have never lived a single day of my life without sinning – falling short of the standard of God. I need His forgiveness every day! Hard is normal. The Christian life is a struggle. But it is the only life to live – it is the good life. If it was easy, I would be wondering if I am a Christian. You see going against the grain is never easy. A dead fish can only go down stream. But a live fish can fight the current. So struggling to live the Christian life is actually a sign that you are in Christ.

Peter says if you are going to suffer, then suffer for the right reasons. The growing Christian knows that trouble, hardships and suffering are used by God to refine us, purify us and actually make us stronger. We become more dependent on God and He in turn gives us power through the Holy Spirit. We entrust ourselves to God who gives us strength.

How can we use our troubles to glorify Christ? From where I don't remember, but there comes the line: "In love's service only wounded soldiers can serve. "

Our own troubles humble us but also make us useful to others who suffer in similar ways. We can empathize with them, pointing them to our loving and all powerful God who will help them as He helped us in our time of need. He cares for us and we can put our troubles and anxieties on Him.

We are all in this together as the Body of Christ. So when one suffers we all suffer. And when one is healed we all rejoice.

We can become students of life's troubles instead of victims. A victim feels so sorry for himself that he has no time for others. A student focuses on helping others so that he has no time to feel sorry for himself. A victim begs God to remove the problems of life so that he might be happy. A student has learned through the problems of life that God alone is the source of all true happiness.

Mother Teresa once wrote about a situation she said she would never forget. One day in Venezuela she went to visit a family who had donated a lamb to her order of nuns. She went to thank them and there she found out that they had a badly handicapped child. She asked the mother, "What is the child's name?" The mother gave her a most beautiful answer. "We call him, 'Teacher of Love,'" said the mother, "because he keeps on teaching us how to love. Everything we do for him is our love for God in action."

We glorify Christ when we avoid crumbling and complaining and instead have an attitude of gratitude. For don't we have a true treasure in Jesus Christ already? He has lavished us with grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

No suffering for a Christian lasts – it is momentary trial that goes away for we are heading toward an eternal glory – heaven!

Even in this life, we who live in this country are so materially blessed. Consider these facts:

- If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are better off than the 6 million who will not survive this week.
- If you have not experienced the dangers of war, the loneliness or prison, the agony of torture and the pangs of starvation, than you are ahead of 500 million people.
- If you can attend church without being harassed and threatened with death and torture, you are more blessed than 3 billion people.

- If you have food in the frig, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep than you are ahead of 75% of this world.
- And if you have money in the bank and in your wallet and investments, you are in the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

You may quibble with these stats, but the truth is if you are a true Christian in America you are not only and chiefly spiritually blessed, but you are also amazingly materially blessed.

Because of Christ we can make it through this world with joy. We will be restored, confirmed, strengthened and established as the Word for today declares. We can rejoice because we are "in Christ" and because we are His "beloved."