

The Message of the Apostle Paul – The Call to Suffer

- I. What I have been doing throughout this past week has largely been a surprise to me. Other than attending a couple meetings, leading a class, preparing for the Lenten Devotion I led on Wednesday and preparing for my Sunday, March 15 Message, all I've done is monitor the news about the Coronavirus, seek wisdom from colleagues in ministry as well as medical professionals and prepare a plan to keep our community of faith safe during this difficult time.
 - A. What I've discovered is a lot of information that changed nearly hourly and was peppered with a great deal of misinformation.
 1. I heard the panic in people's voices over the phone, through text messages and in person.
 2. Fear is so prevalent as people stock up on disinfecting cleansers, soap, and hand sanitizer and . . . what is up with the toilet paper?
 - a. I feel very guilty for doubting a friend when she told me the shelves that usually hold hundreds of rolls of toilet paper were empty.
 - b. Then I went to Sam's Club and witnessed for myself – empty shelves – in Sam's Club.
 3. I am fearful, even as I bear the burden to make the decision about cancelling worship services for the next two weeks and possibly longer.
 - a. I am fearful for our older members and friends as they are the hardest hit by this virus.
 - b. I am fearful for our wider community as we will most definitely face financial hardships, from the locally owned shops and restaurants, their employees, our church and our dedicated staff.
 - B. And I remember the many times, when followers of Christ are told to have faith in facing their fears.
 1. The words of Jesus as he calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee and in turn the fears of his disciples, "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:28)
 2. Where is our faith? Where is my faith?
 - a. If I am afraid, does that mean that I have no faith?
 - b. Does trusting in our faith mean that our fears are unfounded?
 - c. I recognize that I am called to proclaim faith in the midst of my fears as well as the fears of those I love and care for within our faith community.
 3. There it is! The foundation for both my fear and my faith!
 - a. I am fearful for our community; I don't want any of our beloved members to be ill and suffer.
 - b. I want to be strong in my faith as I proclaim a word of hope and God's presence.
 - C. We are called to suffer at times.
 1. We suffer for the sake of others.
 2. We suffer our own illness, discomfort and angst.
 3. We suffer the trials of relationships and situations over which we have no control.
 4. And at the core of our suffering is our connectedness with one another.

5. Isn't it odd that we suffer for and with one another because of our love – our connectedness – with one another?

- II. We read in our Luke 16 about Paul and Silas that they are connected in both their faith and their suffering.
- A. They encounter a young slave girl who makes a lot of money for her owners by telling fortunes.
 1. Her ability is due to her being possessed by a spirit of divination which Paul commanded to come out of the slave girl.
 2. Well, that didn't please the guys that owned the slave girl; their money-maker lost her ability to make them money.
 3. So they confronted Paul and Silas, brought them to the local magistrate and encouraged the citizenry to lash out at Paul and Silas.
 - B. Paul and Silas were stripped of their clothes, beaten with rods and jailed.
 1. Adam Hamilton, in his book, *The Call The Life and Message of The Apostle Paul*, describes the rods used to beat the apostles: "The rods used to beat the apostles probably were a bundle of elm or birch branches strapped together." (Page 112)
 2. Hamilton further writes, "The beating would have left them bruised and bloodied, possibly with a cracked rib or two."
 - C. Certainly Paul and Silas suffered tremendous physical suffering and Paul throughout his ministry knew great hardship. (I assume the same was true for Silas and many other early Christians.)
 1. Paul wrote often of the suffering he endured for the sake of his mission and ministry.
 2. He wrote to the Philippians, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:8)
 3. Paul recognized the relationship between faith and suffering when he wrote to the Romans, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:1-5)
 - D. In my opinion, Paul and Silas suffered being beaten and jailed primarily for two reasons.
 1. First, they did the right thing. They released a young slave girl from the grasps of a spirit within her.
 2. Second, they took full responsibility for doing the right thing. It's not that they were "caught" but that they never denied doing that for which they were accused.

3. Paul knew and recognized that any suffering he would endure would produce in the end hope and for that hope, he and Silas – sitting in a jail cell – praised God and Jesus the Christ.
- III. We most followers of Christ do not suffer physically for the sake of our faith, we do suffer.
- A. We do suffer physically because of disease, accidents and injuries.
 1. We suffer emotionally because of the trials of relationships and seeking our truth worth founded in Christ Jesus rather than our work and accomplishments.
 2. We suffer from isolation and loneliness, we suffer from depression and addiction and we suffer angst because of the suffering of others.
 3. In other words, we suffer from being human.
 - a. We suffer from being human because we are created in the image of God.
 - b. The scriptures are full of examples of God suffering; I am profoundly affected by words early in Genesis that tell us that God was sorry he had made humankind and “it grieved him to his heart.” (Genesis 6:6)
 - c. When we see cruelty and injustice in our world then it is precisely because we are created in God’s image that we join God in reacting to that cruelty and injustice.
 - d. We join forces with God and one another in addressing conflict and hunger and bigotry and hatred in our world.
 - B. In addition to suffering as the result of being human, we also need one another. One of the beautiful parts of the passage in which Paul and Silas are beaten and jailed together is that they are together!
 1. They are in community with one another and must have been very aware of the prayers and support of the larger, growing community of those who were following Christ.
 2. Part of being in community is our unqualified concern for neighbor and the community.
 - a. The intention to live lives of generosity, integrity and justice indicates that a person is ready to follow Jesus living our lives for which we were created.
 - b. It’s been said that if we want to overcome our own shortcomings that we need to get involved in the care and genuine concern of others.
 3. That concern is what will bind us together in addressing this very difficult time of dealing with Covid 19 – the Corona Virus.
- IV. Being called to suffer often means we are in a situation that is not of our own choosing, Kathleen Cahalan writes that we must ask, “What then should we do?”
- A. She continues writes, “For Jews and Christians, the psalms of lament are the best biblical source for fighting with God in a situation not of our choosing. The psalmist gives **voice** to our agony and terror of suffering.”
 1. Walter Bruegemann, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, points out that the psalms are not God speaking to us but the common voice of humanity speaking to God. Laments give voice to our profound disorientation, the loss of a world of promise and goodness. The loss of the promise of a calling and purpose.

- a. Jesus modeled Bruegemann's idea that laments allow us to add our voice to the common voice of humanity speaking to God.
 - b. On the cross, Jesus no doubt felt isolated. In pain and disoriented He relied on the words of the Psalmist to address His station in life even at the point of death.
 - c. Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22.
2. Let's consider what a Psalm of lament actually does for us – it's pretty simple but our individualistic pull ourselves up by the bootstrap society at times doesn't allow for the healing nature of laments.
 - a. First, it gives us a voice to express our pain and suffering; to cry out and name our affliction.
 - b. Second, laments give to us a community that understands loss and suffering; our isolation melts away when we know that others are walking or have walked the deep and dark valley you are experiencing.
 - d. Third, laments provide a safe place in which to wrestle with our God who in reality has never left our sides.
 - e. Fourth, laments allow us to remember that even though we feel far away from God, we remember other times in which God has been with us. There is a turning point in laments that allow for reconciliation with God and our community of faith.
 - f. Finally, laments allow us to praise God and rejoice in our restored relationship with God.
- B. I wish I could say that we can avoid the valleys of life but we can't; but we can seek out companionship to insure that when you're in the valley, you're still moving.
1. To practice the presence of God has become important to me throughout my ministry and my life; that is, to take time to invoke, seek and experience the presence of God through prayer, meditation and worship.
 2. Because of that practice the experience of crying out, "My God why have you forsaken me?" isn't met with God crying back, "I'm right here!"
 - a. Rather, there is a sense of God's presence that brings peace, love, joy and hope.
 - b. And you realize that God was never gone and comes to us in fresh, new and surprising ways.
 3. Let's take up the challenge to be in community in new ways.
 - a. Reach out to others with encouragement – make the call, send the email or text.
 - b. Keep yourself safe and in doing so, you will keep others safe; minimize physical contact with others as much as possible.
 - c. These measures and many of the measures that are being put by the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and WHO (World Health Organization), by our denominational and community leaders are not just health guidelines but they represent love for community and reflect the love of Christ Jesus!
- C. That's the Word of God for the people of God today in the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer for our Church and World in the Face of the Corona Virus Pandemic.

God of all creation who calls into union with you and one another, we confess that we have not always sought the well-being of others; those who live in our neighborhoods and those who live around the world. We often fail to see our connectedness through your call to be the church of Jesus Christ who died not just for His followers but for all humanity.

As we experience now the connectedness of our world through disease, let us trust in the connectedness through which you call us to care for your creation and one another. Bind us together in a world-wide communion that can offer hope in the midst of suffering and loss. We lift up to you the many that have been ill and died, their families grieving over their loss and fearful for their own well-being. We lift up those who are care givers and ask for your wisdom and protection as they care for those who are ill and for those who will become ill.

We pray for nations around the world and for your wisdom and grace to be present through the leadership of nations, states and communities. May your peace allow for informed and compassionate decisions to be made that the health of their citizenry be restored and that your creation be glorified through that restoration of health.

We pray for local community members who will suffer not only illness and loss but also economic difficulties as well. We pray for generous spirits to prevail and care for those hardest hit through diminished business and difficulty in keeping shelves stocked and their places of business safe. We pray for that generosity to prevail through the sharing of resources and that hoarding and price gouging cease. May we be good stewards of all that is necessary and needed throughout these difficult times.

We pray for churches around the world, in our country and in our communities that we will work to present the living Christ as the center of our faith and hope. Call us in the face of any suffering to offer that faith and hope so that others may know you and give you glory and praise. We pray for this in the name of Christ Jesus and in the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.