

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 17, 2020

Pastor Lew Upchurch  
1 Peter 3:13-22

### “Connect the Dots: Suffering and Baptism”

I have to be honest. In our epistle reading from 1 Peter, Chapter 3 there is enough in these 10 verses to preach 100 sermons! I’m not kidding. This section of the letter is packed with the essence of what forms many of the basic teachings of our faith. There’s the call to Christian witness—to “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. There’s the text that describes Christ decent into hell to declare his victory over death and all the evil forces. And of course there’s the great truth that Baptism saves through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, this baptism truth is something I definitely want to talk about today. But I want to talk about it in light of another verse—one that probably doesn’t rank as high on the list of formidable verses as the ones I just mentioned. And it’s verse 14: **“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.”**

So yes, I want to talk today about suffering—the state of undergoing pain, distress, and hardship. And I want to talk about Baptism—the blessed sacrament instituted by Christ himself in which water is applied with the word of God that promises the forgiveness of sins and brings us into God’s family. **Suffering and baptism.** Is there a connection? If so, what does it really mean, not just for you and me, but for all of the faithful? And most importantly, what do these two things have to do with the living hope that is us?

But first I want to be clear about something. In one way or another, we all know what it means to suffer. There’s the physical suffering that plagues us as our bodies age. There’s the mental suffering that sets in as things

like dementia take their toll. There's the emotional suffering that marks our broken relationships. There's the stuff that we label as suffering, but in reality is just disappointment or inconvenience—like the “suffering” of no live sports to watch on TV, no concerts or attend, no restaurants to dine in, or no in-person worship services to attend. Suffering in some capacity is simply a part of everyone's life.

But Peter has another kind of suffering in mind in in our Epistle reading for today. He, of course, was very familiar with physical, mental, and emotional suffering that all of us experience, but that's not what he's talking about here. The suffering Peter addresses is suffering for the sake of Christ. In other words, suffering for one's faith. **“But even if,”** he writes, **you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.”** The words “even if” tells us that Peter is writing to Christians already suffering for their faith. And his point is that no one will ultimately or finally harm Christians. “Even if” they suffer now, they will be blessed. Think about what Jesus says in the sermon on the mount: **“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account”** (Matt. 5:10-11). This is what Peter was repeating here.

Now, I admit on the surface, it may appear that we here in the Wake county area of NC, or wherever you may be watching today, are immune to this particular kind of suffering. Some of us might think we are enduring undue hardship because of these restrictions we're living under, but trust me, none of us are being personally persecuted or reviled or having to endure all kinds of evil against us falsely, because we believe in Jesus. So no, we might not be suffering **personally** in the way Peter is speaking.

But I want you to think about something. Is the body of Christ merely a personal thing that's between us and the Lord? Is the gift of faith and what

we do with that gift on a daily basis just a private matter that's only our business? I hope you are answering "no," because the Bible is pretty clear about this. **"We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another"** (Rom.12:5). It also says **"If one member suffers, we all suffer together"** (1Cor.12:26). So even though we might not be **personally** suffering for the faith at this very moment in our lives, we, as Christians, are, in truth, reviled and persecuted and falsely accused of all manner of evil. Why? Because any accusation against a brother or sister in the faith is an accusation against us all. Any persecution because of faith in Christ is aimed not only at the immediate recipient of that persecution, but at you and me, and all who have been called to faith in Christ. How can this be you might be asking? And why does it matter?

Well here's where baptism comes in. Because In Holy Baptism, we are united to our Lord **and** to every member of the Church in the Body of Christ. Have you ever thought of that? It's a powerful reminder of a **more** powerful truth. As those baptized into the Body of Christ we share in the suffering of the Pakistani Christian thrown in prison for his faith in Jesus. As the Body of Christ, we suffer with the Christian deported because of her faith in Christ. As the Body of Christ, we suffer when anyone is persecuted, tortured, or even killed for their faith. When any Christian anywhere suffers for their faith, whether half-way around the world, or in our own backyard, we all share in the trial and pain and sorrow that suffering brings. Because in the most real terms, we are all one body in Christ!

But as true as this is, you might be thinking, so what? I mean, Pastor Lew, thanks for the incite on suffering...I really feel for those who have it so bad around the world... but I've lost my job, I can't go to the gym, my marriage is on the rocks, and my kids are a mess. Any talk of suffering, my mind immediately goes to those places and the countless others I could name. If that describes you, I get it. I really do. It's no secret that our senses may tell us that our version of suffering has little if anything to do with suffering

on account of our faith. But our baptisms are not a private thing. Our community of faith is not a private thing. Hopefully none of us will ever experience what it's like to actually fear for our lives because of our belief in the crucified and risen Christ. But when we deny that the suffering of the saints **is** our suffering, we deny our divine baptismal union with the whole Church in the Body of Christ. And when we deny our part in suffering for Christ, ultimately we deny the gifts Christ has secured for us in his own suffering.

You know, I titled this sermon **Connect the dots: Suffering and Baptism**. Because for this to make any sense, that's what we have to do—connect the dots. Because it's easy to live in this really small and isolated world we create for ourselves as Christians. And the more we forgot about those who are truly being persecuted for the faith, or ignore them in our prayers, or even act like their problems have little to do with our lives, the more we make Christ's work something that belongs on the fringe of our lives rather than something that belongs front and center. Believe me, Christ didn't die on Good Friday just to give us a little piece of mind when things in our world aren't going that great. **“For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God,”** Peter writes. On the cross, he suffered for our denial of suffering in the world. On the cross, he suffered for all who suffered and who now suffer for his righteousness' sake. On the cross, Christ our Lord took all suffering upon himself to free us from suffering at the end of the age and usher us into the presence of Almighty God. That's the enormity of our faith, my friends.

So thanks be to God today that Peter reminds us that suffering for our faith is part of every Christian life, because as Christians we are all united one to another in the suffering of our Lord. Whether we directly feel the burden of suffering or not, all suffering **within** the Church is the suffering of all the Church. And this isn't a bad thing.

“Because even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed,” Peter writes. Have no fear. Don't be troubled.” Baptism now saves you as an appeal to God for a good conscience.

God will allow us to persevere until our Lord returns, my friends. On that day suffering will cease and through our faith we shall live in his blessed peace forever. That truly is the living hope within us. In Jesus' name. Amen.