

“THE MYTH OF PROBLEM-FREE CHRISTIANITY.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

June 19, 2016, 10:30AM

Text for the Sermon: I Peter 4:12-19

Prayer:

Introduction.

Our congregation here at First CRC is made up of a pretty diverse group of people, but the majority of us are in three generational groups.

Many here are part of what has been coined the “Greatest Generation,” those who were born during or grew up through the great depression and the second world war. They experienced times of suffering, sacrifice and doing without. They knew about rationing, working hard for a greater good, sacrificing for the sake of family and church. They weren’t seeking fame or fortune, but strove to do what was right and best.

Then we have a bunch of baby boomers born after WWII between 1946 and 1964. They didn’t suffer the way their parents did, they had a much better life, more privileges and advantages, more money, more financial success. They started throwing off their parent’s more traditional values.

The third group we have here are the Millennials or Generation Y. Millennials were born after 1980 and were becoming adults after the turn of the millennium.

They are the first digital technology generation. They are even better off than their baby boomers parents and so have a stronger sense of entitlement. They are known to change jobs more frequently and have high expectations of a job that is fulfilling, rewarding, empowering, in other words a job that isn’t like work. They don’t get their grandparents at all who stayed in the same job for 45 years doing the same thing.

They gave us Facebook and the like button. They like to like things and they like to be liked. They are positive bunch that doesn’t like negativity at school or work or home or church.

I know I have made a lot of generalizations and have left out a lot and have painted with a large brush. I did this just to give a bit of background to why in this day and age in this country we generally have a hard time with suffering or pain or hardship.

This is why reading the Bible comes off as so counter cultural. It doesn’t say what we want to hear. It burst our bubble with truth and reality. Is it any wonder lots of Millennials aren’t going to church unless it’s a church that only says positive things like Joel Osteen.

This is why when Peter says don't be surprised at the fiery trials that come, we are surprised. "Wait a minute, I didn't sign up for that, I wasn't expecting that, I don't want that."

Why are we surprised by suffering?

There are two kinds of suffering in this world. There is human suffering, that suffering which is common to all humanity in this fallen, sinful world of ours. Birds fly into plane engines, trains derail, cars crash, kids break arms, people get cancer, terrible natural disasters strike. Sinful, fallen, evil people do things that affect others, terrorists, political leaders, bosses, teachers, coaches, parents. And then of course there are our own sinful choices and actions.

Then there is the suffering that comes because of Christ. Christian persecution comes in a vast variety of ways. There is the kind any of us might experience at school or on the job, or even just for living in Lynden. This kind is occasional, relatively small, and personal

Then there is heavy duty persecution, official persecution, the kind many Christians around the world experience. This is the kind of persecution Peter is warning the church about. Rome was becoming less and less tolerant of this new break off sect from Judaism.

Anyone who decides to believe in Jesus and follow Jesus is going to end up at a cross, at a place of suffering. To be a Christian means to bear a cross. We must learn to expect it and if not us then certainly our children, so we must teach them and prepare them.

Forewarned is forearmed. We are told again and again in Scripture to expect it. The general absence of it in *America is an anomaly*, it is not the norm. Most Christians for the past 2000 years have suffered much, and more Christians are suffering more now than ever before.

The surprise is that America has had a 300 year reprieve from religious persecution. But fiery trials are coming to America. Christianity used to be the main influencer of our culture, but that is no more. It's not that Christianity is dying in America, Christianity is being pushed to the margins. Christianity is losing its home field advantage that it has enjoyed for longer than perhaps any nation.

Don't be surprised. Jesus warned.

John 16:1-2 "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

John 16:33 "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

These things don't just happen, they aren't bad luck or fate or accidents. *God is a God of tests*, of trials, of furnaces. He tested Adam, later Abraham with his only son, he tested Peter and Paul.

When you are going through any fiery trial, remember God brings them and uses them. God's fire is a refining fire, a testing fire, a purifying fire, a faith strengthening fire. Remember Peter's words in chapter 1:

I Peter 1:6-7 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

One of our members happened to mention to a member of another church in town all the cancer and health issues we are having here and that person had the audacity to say they don't have that in their church because they pray.

First of all, I know this to be a praying church, I have experienced the power of your prayers and so have many of you.

But worse, is that person's notion that sickness and suffering aren't a normal and necessary part of the Christian life. If they don't have any refining fire then how are they growing spiritually? Have they bought into the myth of a problem-free Christianity?

This is not strange, it is a normal part of the Christian life. The test proves our faith and strengthens it. Peter is offering good, godly counsel for what to do in the face of suffering and persecution. The first thing he tells us is don't be surprised by it.

How are we blessed by suffering?

Not only should we not be surprised, but we should rejoice and be joyful. And he says it three times. Really, Peter? How is this possible? Who rejoices over suffering? Who is really like Paul and Silas singing in a cold dark jail?

Peter gives several reasons why a person can rejoice in the most trying of times. He does this with the purpose of preparing the church for what is ahead.

In the present moment it is cause for joy because the hand of God is on us, God has counted us worthy to suffer for the sake of His Son, God is pleased to improve and strengthen our faith.

There is also a future joy. All who share Christ's suffering will share Christ's glory.

We have the saying, *no pain, no gain*. Pain and glory go together, they are twin truths. In fact the testing and trying of our faith is a sure sign of our future glory.

Jesus used the illustration of childbirth, what first gave pain, then gives joy. Paul's thorn in the flesh gave him pain and glory, Christ's power and glory were magnified in his trial.

Jesus suffered the shame and pain of the cross and received power and glory and the joy set before Him. Joy in the midst of suffering is possible if we are fixed on the joy that is set before us, that is future.

There is also joy in knowing when we suffer for Christ, His Spirit is with us in a special way.

This fellowship is so close and real that when Jesus confronted Paul on the road to Damascus He said, "Why are you persecuting me?" When we are persecuted Jesus is right alongside of us being persecuted as well.

When Daniel's three friends were thrown into the fiery furnace, Jesus was seen in there with them.

The Spirit was upon Stephen and he saw God's glory in his suffering.

Acts 7:54-58 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.

When Jesus sees someone suffering for His name, He shows up in His glory with His Spirit. This is how today Christians can be put in prison or tortured or even killed without complaining or resisting their oppressors. When we suffer on earth, we have help from heaven.

Peter gives a tall order here, if we suffer in any way for being a Christian, for the sake of the Gospel of Christ, don't be ashamed, but consider it an honor, a gift, a favor from God.

Instead of complaining or begging God to make it all better fast, consider the greater purposes of God and the greater good and the greater glory.

Why and how does judgment come on God's house?

Now Peter takes the issue to a deeper level. Do you ever find yourself wondering what is going on in this crazy world of ours? Why all the troubles everywhere? God is always at work refining and purifying and sending warnings of judgment. They are a call to examine ourselves and take stock of our spiritual lives.

Judgment awaits all mankind, Christians and non-Christians. The prophets in the OT declare that God's judgment will come on His own people first and then on the rest of the world. It often seems that God brings His correction and discipline on His own children more than on the wicked in the world. And that is exactly how it is. God disciplines and corrects and judges those He loves, that is the proof we are sons and daughters.

A father disciplines and corrects his own children, not strangers. The beginning of judgment is always at home. The beginning of reformation is always with the church.

God deals with us more severely in this life for the sake of our souls and our eternal destiny. If God seems to be dealing harshly with you, don't start comparing yourself to others whom God seems to leave alone or even bless.

You don't know what God is doing and what judgment awaits them. Don't become bitter, don't despise God's humbling, don't turn to unbelief. Bear God's test patiently, confident of what awaits. And remember what awaits those who are not sons or daughters.

If God disciplines and corrects us whom He loves, what terrible fate awaits those who have made Him their enemy?

Therefore, trust the will of God.

Therefore. Peter comes to this conclusion. What should Christians do in situations and circumstances of pain and trial and suffering?

What did Jesus do in the midst of His worst suffering? He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Peter says the same thing here. Entrust your soul to God.

Don't trust yourself, but trust God, the creator. Why creator and not savior? Because when life seems out of control it's good to be reminded who is the creator, who is in control.

No Christian ever suffers anything apart from the purposeful will of God. Does this sound harsh to you, to say that our suffering is because of God's will? Does that sound like more than you are willing to say about God? Is this a comforting thought or a discomfoting thought?

I contend it is a comforting thought. First of all, who wants to live in a universe where there is a God who is not in control. Second, our comfort in our suffering is that God is good and perfect and love us and only does what is very best for us. That's why it's not a surprise, it's part of the plan.

God is setting the stage in America to show how great and glorious He really is. He will show Himself through His church and through His people that He is greater and better and more worthy and more glorious than anyone and anything else.

I heard an example of this in the aftermath of the Orlando killings last Saturday night. The next day the Chick-fil-A near there which is closed on Sundays, made sandwiches for the hundreds of people standing in line to give blood. Doing good in the midst of evil.

In the midst of suffering return good for evil, do what is right. Do good to those who are making you suffer, who are causing your pain. Return good for evil. Turn the world upside down.

Implications and applications.

The best thing I can do as a father for my sons is to teach them about tools like a hammer and a chisel and a metal file. Not how to use those tools but how God uses those tools on us, how He cuts and corrects, forms and fashions, purifies and purges, refines and remakes us by His good purposes for our good and His glory.

That's the best a father can give his children, to prepare them so they aren't surprised by suffering and so they don't despise it, but humble themselves under it and entrust themselves to God through it.

A person who can rejoice in the midst of suffering is a person who has a firm grasp on spiritual reality, a person who is standing on bedrock theology, a person who fears God and nothing else.

One author wrote, "God's strength best invades our lives through our weakness and pain. I'm learning that my suffering, when combined with God's strength, is actually far more powerful than my own way of living in times free of suffering" (John Dickerson).

The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon once remarked rather astonishingly, "I dare say the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health ... with the exception of sickness."

"I'm afraid that all the grace that I have got of all my comfortable and easy times and happy hours might [be worth] a penny but the good that I have received from my sorrows and pains and griefs is altogether incalculable. Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in [my] library."

Glory is gained no other way. Jesus entered heaven with scars and so must we.

I Peter 4:19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Prayer: Holy Father, send your Spirit upon us I pray and grant us a glimpse of the glory that awaits as we patiently bear these light and momentary trials in this life. Enable us to trust our souls to our faithful Savior who suffered and died, not so we wouldn't have to, but so that our suffering might be redemptive and fruitful and lead to glory.