

Loving our neighbors while suffering

1 Peter 2:19-25 (NIV)

Sermon by Missy Kauffman Schrock

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19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." [a]

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." 25 For "you were like sheep going astray," [b] but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Are you suffering? I think many of us are. Maybe not all the time, but likely more than before the lockdown. This pandemic has gotten the best of us - we are more isolated from each other, or homebound togetherness may be leaning toward the tedious. Just going out of the house may feel riskier than kicking a wasp's nest.

Yes. We all are suffering in one way or another because the kind of change we have experienced over the past 2 months has been disruptive, unsettling, bewildering, and downright surreal.

Some people are reacting to this change with protests. Some are refusing to leave their house. Some are unphased by the potential danger, choosing not to wear masks or take precautions. Some are refusing to go to work and others are showing up every day because they are essential workers. Each of these reactions involve some sort of suffering, loss or major day-to-day disruption.

Think for a minute about how you have experienced suffering over the past six weeks or so. Take a moment to consider what you have given up, or lost or even unwanted things you have gained because of Covid19.

I chose this passage from I Peter instead of the other lectionary texts for this Sunday because I was struck by verses 19-20.

For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

There are many ways to suffer, but how do we know when the way we are suffering is right? How do we become conscious of God while we are suffering?

How often have you said, "Oh God," not as an expletive, but as a way to acknowledge God's presence in the moment? I can think of a couple of scenarios for myself.

When I whack my knee on my desk I yell, "Ow God!" I'm really saying, "Help me with this unexpected pain."

When a car comes out of nowhere and I barely escape a collision, I wheeze, "Oh God!" Then, I'm really saying "Thank you for your protection and help me regain my wits."

When I hear about a good friend's cancer diagnosis, I whisper, "Oh God!" This time I am really saying, "Why is this happening and I trust you will intervene."

I see these as different kinds of suffering. There's the tangible, painful bruise left on my knee. There's the racing heart and panic of a near miss on the highway. And, there's the soul deep empathy for my dear friend. In each case, I am conscious of God's presence in my suffering.

But, back to the question of how do we know when the way we are suffering is right and commendable before God?

That question brought me to Mark 12:30-31: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

In my suffering, am I conscious of my love for God and my neighbor? How would my suffering change if, in the midst of terrible pain, heartbreak, loneliness, grief, isolation, restriction, disruption, surreality, I fixed my heart and mind on loving God and my neighbor?

What if I was conscious that my suffering is part of the common good? Surely, that was the intent of Jesus' suffering on the cross. He was fixed on his love for God in heart, soul, mind, and strength, all while he was enduring intense pain in his body. He was also fixed on his love for neighbor.

It is by his wounds that *we*, the collective *we*, the common good *we*, the entirety of creation *we*, have been healed.

We, collectively and individually, have some choices ahead of us in the coming weeks as our government leaders attempt to open up the economy.

What is the right thing to do? How will our heart, soul, mind and strength remain commendable to God when all we want to do is pack out Goshen Brewing Company at dinnertime, have a 3 or 4-generation cookout in the back yard or sit side-by-side worshipping together on a Sunday morning?

We have been suffering. We have been frightened. We have been discombobulated. But, we have not been doing any of this in vain. We have been doing what is right. We have been conscious of God in our suffering. And, we have been loving our neighbors all along the way by loving ourselves enough to keep our distance.

“By His wounds we have been healed.”

This week, as you make choices about where to go, what to do and who to see, remember to love God and love your neighbor, and consider your suffering within this context. Be commendable before God. Follow the way of Jesus. Do what is right.

In the words of my favorite Carrie Newcomer song, “you can do this hard thing.” Amen