

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

1 Peter 4:12-14 ¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

1 Peter 5:6-11 ⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Let's talk about suffering. A great topic for mother's day!

When I first read this text, I thought I understood it. I thought I knew what it meant to suffer for Christ's sake.

Sure, I've experienced suffering for Christ. In my move to seminary, I had to give up cable. I gave up John Stewart and Medical Diaries and The Newly Weds for Christ.

And, I had to give up monthly massages for Jesus. Seminarians don't have money for luxuries like that. And, for three months, I had to spend 4 hours a week, talking about the history of the Christian church. That's got to be suffering, right?

Probably not. I don't think that's what Peter was talking about. I don't think that Peter would consider giving up cable and massages suffering for Christ.

No, Peter is talking about suffering on a much deeper level. It's not even a human, worldly suffering; it's a suffering for Christ.

The audience in 1 Peter is not a unified or established community church. Peter does not write this letter to the local Catholic, Lutheran, or even Presbyterian Church.

Peter's addresses are Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor. They were the social nonconformists in their towns. Today, they would be seen as the punk teens with brightly-colored hair, or the hippies strolling through the streets chanting songs about peace. They might even be seen as loin-cloth Gandhis confronting societal norms.

For being Christian, for refusing to worship pagan gods, they are persecuted. And it's getting bad. Christian women and slaves still have to live in Pagan households. The Pagan men who are in charge of the house, at the time, are really putting the pressure on believers. The Christians are the ones who suffer for refusing to relinquish their faith. They are socially ostracized and given no rights as citizens. Because of that they believe, they lose their status in the community and become the resident aliens.

They are not in the majority. They barely constitute a minority. They are scattered. Scattered throughout a world that doesn't understand them. No doubt, they are suffering. From the looks of it, it looks like God has lost. It looks like there is no possible way to maintain any unity and community in this world. Peter justly calls this a fiery ordeal.

The addressees of the first letter of Peter are in pain. They are suffering in a way, we as American Christians could never fully grasp. We put fish emblems on the backs of our cars without hesitancy; we wear cross necklaces everyday, and we label our churches in bold letters so that all who pass by can know what the building is for. We do not live in the same fear of persecution and oppression as these Christians in Asia Minor.

For us, being Christian does not mean being part of the minority. It does not label us as the socially unacceptable or deny us any rights.

So what connection do we have with these Christians? What can we learn from the New Testament book 1 Peter?

Well, at our baptism we become part of the body of Christ. We become connected to every part of the body in every place and time. In our baptism, we become united with Christians who are in community and with Christians who are suffering. We become connected with the addressees of the letter of 1 Peter.

Yet, we must be careful. These addressees did not just live 18-hundred years ago. There are still Christians in the world suffering simply for their faith.

10 days ago in Russia, local police raided a Christian service and prayer meeting in Ydmurtia. Believers were forced to stand in the freezing weather with their arms up in the air while officers searched each one of them. Men officers groped women and threatened them with rape. Russian officers screamed profanities and insults at the men. 46 people were arrested and interrogated.

A couple of weeks ago, 40 Christians were arrested in Saudi Arabia. The government said that they were arrested for trying to “spread their poisonous religious beliefs.”

In parts of India and Africa, laws prohibit Christians from evangelizing. Christians caught sharing God’s Word are chased out of town, beaten, or worse.

Suffering for Christ IS a reality for millions of Christians across the world. They are still the scattered, isolated minorities that Peter is speaking to.

But Peter’s message isn’t just an acknowledgement of their horrible situation. Peter didn’t just affirm, “yea, your life stinks,” and moved on to write his next letter.

No, Peter has something to tell these folks. Look again at the letter. Every line of suffering is surrounded in a message of hope.

Peter says, “rejoice, be glad and shout for joy.”

Rejoice? Be glad and shout for Joy? In the midst of all their suffering? How does that even make sense? It sounds like Peter's Pastoral Counseling Skills need some help.

Even to us, who can barely imagine the pain these people must be experiencing, can see Peter taking his "put-on-a-happy-face" advice a bit too far. Surely Peter had something more sympathetic he could have said to them. Maybe he could have just said, "You'll be okay." "God is with you." "Hang in there."

Peter's advice seems a bit extreme and harsh. "Why are surprised? Don't you know that your brothers and sisters across the world are suffering too? Rejoice! Be joyful—You are sharing in Christ's suffering!"

But I think Peter is on to something that even we need to hear. We are sharing in Christ's sufferings, because we are part of his body. When one finger hurts, doesn't the whole body feel the pain? When one knee is in pain, doesn't the whole body also suffer? We may be at

the tips of the toes, but when a hair on the head is yanked out, don't we still feel it?

I think mothers best understand this unity. I've heard many mothers say that when their child hurts, they hurt. When their child cries, they cry too. It is a deep connection that has been there for since the first birth.

I don't think I fully understood it until early this year. I realized that every time I cried on the phone with my mother, there were also tears flowing on the other end of the line. Every time I received exciting news, I heard a smile on the other end.

A lot like mothers feel such a deep unity with their children, so too, Christ is united to us. And Christ is the bond that unites us to other believers.

Tuesday, I found comfort in belonging to a such a faith community.. After my first class that morning, I decided to make a quick run to the bank. As I walked in, another customer and I made eye-

contact. Before I could say hello, he began to yell. His voice was harsh and full of hate. His fit soon had the attention of everyone in the bank. Then he began to swing his arms at me, threatening to hit me.

He was three times my size. I was terrified. I had done nothing to provoke the man, and he obviously was not in the right state of mind. I just stood back trying to ignore him, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see him moving back toward me. He continued his rage toward me for the next three minutes. The oddity of the situation was compounded in that no one in the bank tried to help me. No one said anything to me, even after he left.

I left the bank in tears. I hopped into my car, and quickly drove home. As I drove, I began planning who I would go talk to. I needed help processing what had just happened. I didn't understand why the man scared me so much and why he was so angry. Then I realized that I was rushing home to Columbia because I have a family there. I have

friends and mentors who are always willing to shoulder my burdens and take on my fears.

This is the community Peter was reminding his audience about. We don't have to suffer alone. We have a family.

Peter has a message of hope in our suffering. And in that my friends, we can definitely rejoice. We have a family, whose bonds are Christ. And those are bonds that can't be broken.

In undergraduate, I studied chemistry. One thing I learned from the class--- This is an exciting moment for me. I get to talk about science in a sermon!—I learned that alone, hydrogen bonds are one of the weakest forms of bonds. However, when two or molecules with hydrogen bonds come together, the strength drastically increases. In fact, in groups, hydrogen bonds can become a force to be reckoned with.

We, like the hydrogen bonds, are weak when we are alone. But that is the good news—that we are not alone. We come in a group, and we too are a force to be reckoned with.

We may not be the ones suffering for our faith like those in the letter of 1 Peter or in Russia or in Saudi Arabi. We may be suffering in other ways. This letter of 1 Peter teaches us that we don't have to suffer alone. We are to be supported by one another and to support one another. We can be the mothers crying and rejoicing on the other end of the phone line.

And even in the times when we cry, and when the world does not understand us, we can also dance with joy because we are a part of Christ's family.