

APRIL 4, 2021

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”

PALM SUNDAY SERMON: Matthew 21:1-13

This morning as we celebrate Palm Sunday, we also wrap up the series in the series we've been working on. Thus far we've tackled the blessings and the bling, today is the beatings. Here's what we've come to. The idea that the presence of blessings of health and wealth is a reliable standard to help us assess the genuineness and strength of our faith doesn't hold water. In fact it's rather a dangerous standard. What is a metric that has reliability is simply the fruit born out of our hearts and in our lives. Then we took a deeper look at blessing. We found that blessing is the favor of God poured out typically in some spiritual fashion, and dispensed when where and how God chooses. We cultivate it by humbly, earnestly, and correctly discerning the will of God and surrendering to it in heart, word, and deed.

What we also found is that having the right measuring stick for our faith put together with our understanding of blessing creates an amazing cycle that continues to grow and deepen our faith, as well as infuse our lives with more purpose and productivity. When we surrender to God's will, we bear better fruit, which cultivates God's favor, which equips and empowers us to continue to surrender to God's will, which bears fruit, which cultivates favor and on and on.

The last piece today is the beatings, suffering. This is something just like health and wealth that is sometimes pushed as a standard for assessing the genuineness of our faith. If our faith is true, we will suffer and be persecuted for it. No suffering, weak faith. We've already answered the question of what is a reliable standard for assessing our faith. No need to revisit it. The reality of suffering for our faith still deserves to be unpacked, and the beginning of Holy Week is a great place to start.

First, let's get to the misunderstanding. To those outside the faith, there is something that is alienating to many of them. It is a confusing of the terms persecution, consequence, and suffering for our faith.

Jesus' final week gives us several stories that begin to shed light on how to define them properly for our own day and age. Before Jesus comes into the city, we see a dramatic moment. He weeps over Jerusalem. Why? Not because of what is about to happen to Him in the city, but rather because He knows the destruction that is awaiting it and is moved to compassion on the very people out to kill Him. He then makes an intentional statement as He enters. The crowd is cheering Him on as their Messiah enters. He enters on the back of a colt, which is a statement in and of itself. He enters in the style of a King in the line of David. Knowing that representation from the priests is present, there is a loud message given that Jesus knows will take those plotting against Him to another level of anger and intention to get rid of Him soon.

On another layer, this is also something that would likely have gotten Roman eyes on Him as well. If they got wind of what this entrance was saying, the idea that He is self-identifying as a King and Messiah would get their attention. There is a swell of Jewish people in Jerusalem for the Passover and any chance someone might instigate an uprising was taken seriously. That the potential here is that Jesus is elevating Himself above Caesar would also be a significant detail that begins to give Rome a reason to suspect He is a seditionist.

In other words, two rules broken. One was the Jewish law against blasphemy, or equating oneself with God in Jesus' instance. The other was the Roman rule that no one elevates themselves about Caesar, and even a whiff of stirring up trouble wouldn't be taken lightly.

So here let's take a moment to start identifying some definitions. For our purpose here, I identify persecution as being targeted specifically for who or what one believes in. Consequence is simply the good or bad result of a choice. Suffering for our faith happens when we aren't being persecuted, yet make a choice that carries with it negative consequence as a conscience of faith.

Jesus here is not persecuted for His faith. He was Jewish, if He were persecuted for His faith so would every other Jew have been, and they were not. There wasn't the likelihood of being jailed, tortured, or killed simply for worshipping the Jewish God. What was happening here that would lead to suffering on Good Friday was consequences for breaking intentionally several rules that were known to everyone. Largely Jesus is being consequence for breaking two basic rules of Rome and the Jews. He was claiming an identity as a man that no man was allowed to claim. Equality with God and prominence over Caesar. Jesus knew exactly what He was doing.

The next day Jesus goes in and cleanses the temple, flipping tables and driving folks out. Again, intentional action that He knew carried consequence with it. In fact we know He was purposely headed specifically to embrace the consequence. Once again, He is breaking rules. One didn't go into sacred space like the temple and start getting aggressive. If there was something more in their face that would make the priests need to speed up their plot to kill Jesus, this was it. They couldn't risk Jesus' followers getting any ideas to behave similarly elsewhere. To potentially spark off an uprising, as had occurred several times before, carried with it the likelihood of bringing the wrath of Rome down on the Jewish community. This also broke another Roman rule. Often people could run their mouth in a problematic way, and even gather a following, and get away with it. The catch was that so long as all it was words without action, you might get flagged as someone to watch but not necessarily arrest. Attach aggressive action to those words and now you are on the chopping block. If there's one thing they wouldn't tolerate it's revolt, and the ringleader perceived to be riling things up could die a traitor's death on the cross.

Another day, more rules broken intentionally, carrying consequence that Jesus was fully prepared to accept. This ratcheting up in tension continues over the next couple of days where confrontations happen with the priesthood as they send people to pick at Jesus and try to trip Him up. Famously we see time and again that Jesus turns the situation around and the ones looking to make Him look bad end up looking a bit foolish themselves. Consequence. Picking back at people you already know dislike you enough to be plotting your death. They'll get angrier and more passionate about doing you in.

The bill comes due late in the week. Of course we are all too familiar with the events of Good Friday, where Jesus endures mocking, beatings, and ultimately death on the cross. This is the suffering.

Keep something in mind however. So often Jesus is identified with and by His suffering. There's nothing wrong with this in the sense that we are moved to gratitude and humility, regarding what He endured on our behalf. In comparison to the rest of His life though, the suffering we identify Him

with in truth comprises essentially a single day of His life. Yes, I'm sure in the years of His ministry He endured some hardships, the life of a wandering preacher and teacher certainly would. However the suffering of Christ is directly tied to this last week, His passion.

Jesus has not been subtle with His disciples about what their treatment of Him means for them. They too will suffer. They will be persecuted. Most of them will die a martyr's death. This is what we read when it talks about them having joy that they were counted worthy to suffer even as Christ suffered. It's why the idea that our suffering is a mark of our faith. And unlike Jesus, the early church would come to be persecuted for the simple reason they believed in Him. They dared to believe in Him as Messiah, counting themselves in the ranks of blasphemers if they are Jewish and we see that play out in Acts where Stephen is stoned to death for believing in Jesus. They dared to believe in a human as divine, as the Son of God, King of Kings. They put Jesus above Caesar.

They would be jailed, tortured, and executed simply because of who they believed in. This is persecution. And that the early church ultimately endured the suffering and persecution that Jesus foretold attached itself to part of the Christian identity.

Something happened after a couple hundred years that changed the context of what it meant to be a Christian, and I suggest started two channels of thought or behavior that have been a problem for Christian witness and testimony for century on century. Christianity became the religion of the Empire.

Suddenly they weren't being persecuted anymore. In fact, as we see history unfold, there were many in the church who enjoyed power, influence, and wealth connected to their status. Suddenly those who were fearful of being found out no longer have reason to fear.

One channel that develops is for religious leaders to allow their new status to compromise and corrupt their faith and practice. Rather than calling on rulers, monarchs, and emperors to rule and govern in radically Christlike fashion, too many times they swung the other direction and were in cahoots with those in power in ways that compromised the example of the church, particularly as we view it in hindsight.

Not unlike the story of the Bible, we see a pattern emerge that is consistent. In the Old Testament, there are those prophets who speak truth to the King and were punished, and those who spoke lies to flatter and hold on to their status. In the New Testament there is the priesthood, in cahoots with the Roman government and enjoying the fruits of that relationship. This is very much the story of how and why Holy Week came to pass as it did. Now Christianity has emerged from under an oppressive boot, and for many in leadership the opportunity for comfort, influence, and ease is attractive and compromising honest faith and witness to those in power to maintain one's status and role.

In fact, as we've seen over the past weeks, the persecuted become persecutors, targeting people simply for who they believe in. In the Christianized western world, what develops is that most persecution of Christians happens by other Christians.

In this channel, I would imagine Jesus being glad His people are no longer persecuted. Perhaps His command would be to use their new found freedom and influence to make a Kingdom difference in how they address the affairs of state. This simple act of standing up to a ruler may change things for the better, if one associates some degree of suffering as a consequence of our faith, would likely provoke some uncomfortable reactions. The other channel involves a group called the ascetics. Essentially this was the strain of Christianity that inflicted their own suffering since the world wasn't filling that role as it used to. So we see long, sometimes dangerously so, fasting. We see people going into the desert for long times of self-imposed isolation. Other deprivation choices like vows of silence, poverty, celibacy and so on are personal ways to suffer for the sake of Christ. Many of you are familiar with those who would use whips and flail themselves for penance, the sense being that suffering ties us closer to Jesus. If you read Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code*, you'll remember the monk who is a main character. He uses essentially a bend around the thigh with barbs all over it. When feeling tempted or like he may not have the resolve for his mission, he cranks on this band so that the barbs bite into his flesh. Self imposed suffering.

This idea that we have to suffer even if we have to inflict it on ourselves has born out in various, in my opinion all unhealthy, expressions. It's also affected our testimony when Christians have come to the place of contriving victim status when no one is actually persecuting.

First, let's be clear about scripture. It does talk about suffering, but no where does Jesus say "and if the world won't make you suffer then you do it yourself." That said, now let's get into this idea of suffering.

To see suffering only through the lens of the early church is to miss the boat. Here in America we live in a drastically different society and world.

We enjoy freedoms to pursue our faith in ways they didn't, and in a way that Christians in other areas of the world do not. So what does suffering look like in 2021 America?

What it doesn't look like is persecution given the definition offered at the beginning of the message. None of us are in danger of any consequence, certainly not jail, torture, and death simply because we believe in Jesus. If this were the case, there wouldn't be churches all over the country with lots of people in them worshipping. I doubt if we were under the penalty of death simply for believing in and worshipping Jesus that any one would be publicly broadcasting their services. I know some will disagree with me in the concept of persecution, however it can't be argued with that our state and federal and local laws have nothing that would penalize us simply for wearing a cross necklace or showing up to church.

That said, let's not confuse terms here. Just because there isn't persecution doesn't mean Christians don't suffer for their faith.

Before tackling that idea, let's clarify the term consequence. I've mentioned this before in this series and I'll mention it again as I have personally been in the past who I'm about to describe. If I go out and share my faith in a way that is arrogant, dismissive, rude, insulting, condescending and so forth, I will likely alienate them. I may even get some verbal pushback or rude comments in return. Their reaction isn't persecution, nor am I suffering for my faith. I'm dealing with the consequences of being a jerk.

This becomes very important to sort out. Many years ago, when this was me, we had a way of being able to "spiritualize" anything. We could come in on Sunday and share our stories, and it was very quick and easy to make myself feel good and avoid any blame for why I wasn't effective. The reactions I got were the result of the devil having taken hold of their heart, and the world just hates me because I love Jesus, and this is the suffering I have to endure for simply standing strong for Christ in this broken and fallen world.

I might even get a bunch of "amens" from the people around me.

Look to the people I'd interacted though and you'll likely get a different response. "No, I don't have anything against that guy for being a Christian, that's fine, I just have a problem with being disrespected and talked down to."

Mixing up these ideas in our minds is a fast road to blaming everyone else for my own lack of effectiveness and avoid asking the simplest of questions. "I believe this message has the power to change lives and change the world, so if it's not connecting what am I doing that I shouldn't be and what am I not doing that I should?"

And to be honest, when people, even maybe especially non Christians, hear these over the top "woe is me" kinds of complaints that really aren't rooted in reality, it erodes the message. They know that for me to put myself in the company of the persecution of the early church, or even those in our own time who are truly under the threat of jail or death just for believing is gravely disrespectful, and dishonest.

As I said, though, this doesn't mean we don't suffer or have opportunity to suffer for our faith. Suffering for our faith is far more compelling than

claiming a false persecution or just dealing with the consequences of our own actions and attitudes.

Suffering for our faith happens when due to our faith conscience, we can't follow or feel inspired to break a rule. Breaking a rule becomes an act that derives from our faith and in being intentional we respond in strength and with a willingness to endure whatever consequence comes.

Which brings us back to this spirit of Christ we see during Holy Week.

The reason this is different from persecution is that the rules are singling me out because of my believe in Jesus. Rules are things like laws, company policies, or those unspoken rules and codes that exist in different clubs, organizations and the like. They apply across the board to everyone no matter what they believe. The consequence and potential suffering are from breaking a rule, not for in whom I believe.

Think about the civil rights movement. Many of those who marched and engaged in peaceful sit ins and such did so as conscience of faith.

Many were beaten some killed, many jailed because they broke the rules. They sat where the rule said they weren't allowed, they conversed with people whom the rules said they shouldn't. They knew the rules, broke them, and did so knowing what might happen as a result.

If a company sets out a new policy that asks me to engage in practices that are too far for me to embrace as a conscience of faith, what do I do? I could compromise my faith. I could talk to my supervisor and see if there's some way around the situation. It may come to ultimatum. "If you don't follow the policy, you'll be fired." Maybe I resign. Maybe I say no and get fired. Maybe I quietly leave the conversation with no intention of breaking my conscience and see how long it takes to get canned. Regardless the options that see me out of a job are the places where I may suffer for my faith.

Last instance, let's say I'm part of some organization and over time realize there's some shady things taking place. Depending on how severe, my conscience of faith may compel me to now just leave the group, but report their actions to the proper authorities to stop whatever damage is being done from continuing. We've all seen what happens too often to a whistle blower. Their life gets turned upside down and their name dragged through the mud. They broke a rule. There is consequences to suffer.

In all of these kinds of scenarios, we could put it one of two ways. "I went to jail/lost my job/get run through the ringer because the world hates me for loving Jesus. They couldn't stand I'm a Christian and that's why it shook out this way."

The problem with this is that one simple question cuts through the logic. "Well, your boss/the police/your friends have known you for five years and all of them know you're a Christian. So why did it take this long for such and such to happen?" It becomes painfully obvious that the suffering is the consequence of breaking a rule, not something dealt only because of my faith in Christ.

So how about this response instead?

"You know, I was just being asked to do something that I couldn't go along with and stay true to my faith."

"Do you regret it?"

"No, I knew what I was getting into when I made my choice. I'll deal with the fallout."

That is a statement coming from a place of strength and conviction. It means we own our choices. It acknowledges the role of faith in the choice, the power of our faith to get us through, yet stops short of confusing persecution with consequence with suffering for our faith.

So why is this mentality thing important?

The significance is that it keeps us tethered to Christ in all we do, and sends us forward with language that is honest, and in many ways inspiring. For example, even if whomever I'm talking to about the suffering I brought on myself thinks that I may be foolish for the decision, very often our conviction to principle and something larger than ourselves is respected and inspiring. Our witness and testimony are congruent with both our faith and the reality of our circumstance.

It also connects us to Jesus, particularly as we move into Holy Week. At what point do we read of Jesus complaining or whining about all these "bad people that are out to get Him and how unfair it all is?" We don't. The closest we get is in the Garden as He agonizes over His pending death. But even here, it isn't some finger pointing, blaming prayer. There is a normal, understandable fear for what lies ahead. Yet just as has been the case through every step from Palm Sunday through the week, Jesus owns the choice, and willingly goes to His death.

Think about the heart of Jesus as even as He hangs on the cross, He isn't slinging accusations or lodging complaints. He says "forgive them, they know not what they do."

From before entering the city as He weeps over Jerusalem to His final moments on the cross, Jesus is the image of compassion and love. He is the standard of resolve and willingness to self-sacrifice. I suggest that His capability to continue on in unflinching love for those who both love and hate Him has a lot to do with owning His choices and accepting the consequences that will come before He ever even has to deal with them. When we see our faith as something that puts us at odds with the world in conflict, we can easily frame the consequences of our actions as happening TO us. This is often the root of bitterness and resentment.

Yet we see apostles able to endure so much worse than any of us have ever had to as a consequence for their faith, under legitimate persecution and praising God, singing hymns, and rejoicing. They knew what they were signing up for when they chose to follow Jesus. That sense of purpose, willingness, and intentionality allowed them to own everything in their ministry, perhaps especially the suffering that would follow.

This is our gift as well. Suffering today for our faith looks very different than it did 1700 plus years ago. Thankfully it's much less severe than for the early church. The question before us is whether or not we have become so accustomed to our comfort and ease that when real suffering poses a consequence of our conscience of faith, what will we do? Do we give in and preserve our comfort? Do we stand firm in love and compassion and follow in the footsteps of willing self-sacrifice?

The way we frame our testimony matters. I am glad we're not living in a time where we have to worry about getting fed to the lions just for believing. I am glad we have the freedom to live our faith. I am even glad for those moments of conviction that grant us the opportunity to be an example of what uncompromising faith looks like, even in the face of suffering. We can face suffering so much more easily if we take a note from Jesus. Choose and own our choices. Begin from a place of compassion. When we suffer consequence, let's be moved with compassion for those afflicting us. It guards the heart from bitterness. It helps us speak and act in ways that are blameless.

This is the integrity of faith that launched and grew the early church. This is what will help us continue to move Christianity today closer to that transforming power of testimony rooted in love, grace, and sacrifice.

Finally in this segment, we hear the words spoken to Thomas echoed. "Through you have not seen Him." Remember, Jesus said to Thomas, in the presence of the other disciples, that they are blessed because they have seen. They have had the privilege of witnessing the fullness of Jesus ministry and glorification. Then He says blessed are those who have "not seen and yet believed." These are those Christians. At the same time, so are we. We have not seen, yet we have believed. This message is not just general to these five churches, it is timeless. Every person who has not seen and yet believed is privy to this reward and inheritance as we persevere in faith through our own struggles unique to our own time, place, and context. Next we see yet another affirmation that the gospel in which they have believed and the promises offered are credible and assured. Peter cites the prophets. Long before they spoke not willy nilly or after some vague skimming of a resource. They were diligent, intentional, and Spirit led to understand what and when the coming of the Messiah would entail. He indicates that their mission was more than selfish, it was selfless, looking to provide hope to those who would live into the revelation of the Messiah, of Christ. The gravity, enormity, and awesomeness of their work, cast forward, acknowledged by those who witnessed Jesus, and preached forward by the power of the Holy Spirit are so enormous that even the angels, heavenly beings themselves, seek to understand and appreciate them.

This concludes the "introduction" of the letter. Note the brilliance of it. It begins with credibility, the apostle. It offers a wonderful hope in their salvation and reward as they endure. Then it bookends the introduction with credibility, citing the prophets of old through the preachers of the early church to their ears and the witness of angels.

Then we move to a discussion of holiness. They, and all of us, are reminded not to give in to the temptations around them. Imagine you are a Christian in this time and place. Simply being a Christian makes you stand out. You don't do the pagan rituals or participate in pagan morality. You follow the expectations and love of Jesus. It makes you obvious. You're also being tormented and persecuted because your behavior identifies you as believing in Him. What is the temptation? Start acting like your old self to fit in and take the pressure off.

These verses gently and kindly encourage them that they have expectation. Consider these verses, combined with the faith and hope they received in light of Jesus words at the Last Supper to the disciples in John. He tells them not just to believe, but to act accordingly. This is the essence of where we are here. Trust in your salvation and reward, and act accordingly so as not to lose it by demonstrating in deed that the heart has abandoned Christ.

There is then this verse about the "impartial" judge, and about being "foreigners".

This impartiality is incredibly important. When we are in a place where we are doing the right thing, following the right person, and getting kicked around by those who are doing wrong, we have a question. When we see the unjust powerful and prospering and the just beaten and bullied, we have a question. "How is this fair?" It's honest, and it's understandable. It's also likely what many of these Christians would have wondered. Peter reminds them to think in different terms and timetables. Yes, what is happening now is unfair. No, it's not easy. Yet in the end, there is a judge who sees things for what they are. The wicked who are rewarded in this life ultimately are seen for who they are and receive the just consequence. The just and faithful who are persecuted and suffer in their life are seen for who they are and receive just consequence. While a temporary reward may be with the unfaithful, the eternal inheritance earlier in the chapter awaits the faithful. It is an encouragement, and this sense of reverent fear points them to respect and regard the long term understanding of how God works things out.

The "foreigner" image is also one of hope and assurance. Some translations say "stranger" others say "pilgrim". The sentiment is the same. This world is not our home, heaven is. Our time here is transient, limited. Even if there are things we suffer, they aren't going to be forever. Knowing this we can endure, especially when we grasp that when we arrive in our true home, the Kingdom of God, it is forever. Knowing where we are bound can make the journey all the easier to bear, even when the journey is hard.

These verses that follow beautifully remind them of the pricelessness of their salvation and inheritance by acknowledging that the cost of it is also priceless and eternal. It wasn't bought with cheap silver or gold, things that have no eternal value. It was acquired through the ultimate sacrifice of the perfect Son of God. God made flesh taking the consequence of their sin so that the bridge could be built between imperfect humanity and perfect God.

The chapter ends with a compliment that they have chosen wisely to live into the truth of Jesus and have loved one another. They are encouraged to continue loving one another, and to know that while the understanding of faulty humanity ultimately will meet its end, those who have embraced the eternally true and reliable word of God will similarly receive the blessing of eternal life in the presence of God.

This opening chapter in its generality is incredibly timeless. Every Christian in every age has endured their own trials and temptations. The response to these five churches in Asia Minor is no different to us today. The promise of God's faithfulness to us, our redemption, and our place in the Kingdom of Heaven are assured when we endure whatever our lot may be. God's job has been done, to redeem us and sustain us. Our job remains to be faithful through the best and worst of times, trusting that whatever comes the impartial judge will reward our faithfulness and love.

Maundy Thursday 2021

As Holy Week comes closer to a close, we arrive at Maundy Thursday. This is the sobering beginning to what transpires on Good Friday. As such, it's hard to fully separate the two.

The night before Jesus goes to the cross is heavy with meaning and incident. Jesus and the disciples gather for the Last Supper, which is the Passover meal. This meal includes many important events and details.

Jesus institutes what we continue to celebrate today, Holy Communion. In this moment, Jesus forecasts what is about to happen in less than 24 hours to the disciples. One might call it a prediction in a secular sense, a prophecy in a religious sense, or a word of knowledge in His omniscient sense. In all of it we see Jesus keenly aware of what is coming. The moment is so powerful that a kind of reenactment of it is what jogs the disciples to recognize Him in one of the post-resurrection stories. For us, it is a holy remembrance that points us to the cross, to the resurrection, and the promise of His one day return.

Judas betrays Jesus. It is on this occasion that the fullness of what is about to happen is triggered. Judas is a complicated character among the disciples. Dishonest, yet faithful enough not to be found out. Given to betrayal yet utterly distraught when he realizes what he has done. He is a counterpoint to Peter and cautionary to how deeply we can sink into sorrow and regret when we allow our hearts to move apart from Jesus. Where Peter's sorrow in denial turns to restoration with Jesus and greatness as an apostle, Judas' separation leads him to end his own life.

Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. In an amazing, humble example of servant love, the One through whom all things were created embraces a task of hospitality and cleans their feet. This was a task reserved for the servant in a household, certainly not the master of the house. Jesus in action flips the message that the greatest master is the one who is willing to act in servant love.

In John there is the marvelous "Farewell Discourse" where Jesus gives His disciples instructions about how they will show the world they belong to

Him. He calls them to obedience to His command, which is to love one another. In a kind of foreshadowing comment He calls them to the same willingness to self-sacrifice that He is about to endure. "Greater love has no one than one who lays down their life for their friends." Remember too, that Jesus says to them in that same conversation "I call you friend."

After the meal, they go to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus offers His agonizing prayer and in a wonderfully human moment asks for the task to be taken from Him. In a beautifully obedient moment says "not my will but thine." And in a resolve perhaps only that could come from the divine sets forward to encounter what is to come with poise, compassion, and grace.

The disciples are each of us. They haven't fully grasped what is going on. As Jesus prays, they sleep. They can't keep their eyes open. How often does this happen to us? A moment arises where God is trying to do something, yet our vigilance fails. If we happen to seize the moment, it is only because God has caused something to poke us with our own version of "wake up! Can't you even pay attention for an hour?"

All too human, the disciples spring to action, Peter specifically as Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. He, and the others, have still missed that Jesus is the suffering servant, the Prince of Peace. An ear is cut off, and healed by Jesus. In the midst of an altercation between the angry force coming to arrest and the fiery disciples wanting to protect Him, Jesus is the peacemaker. He stifles the disciples and gives Himself up. He "lays down His life willingly."

As Jesus is tried, He, particularly in the gospel of John, is a picture of purpose. He is a man of few words, and does nothing to rail against the false accusations. He says very little as He is mocked and assaulted. Often we see Jesus response is that "He said nothing." No retort, no defense, no harsh words for those sending Him to His death. He is a man, a Savior, of purpose and has committed to forging through the torment for the greater prize of saving all of us.

As the crucifixion plays out, we see scripture fulfilled. The piercing of the side, casting lots for His clothing, being "counted among the lawless", that none of His bones would be broken, and that the "shepherd will be struck and the sheep scattered" are all noted as fulfillment of what had been foretold about the Messiah. In their cruelty, playing out this scene, the enemies of Christ inadvertently continue to cement His identity. Even the sarcastic sign that Pontius Pilate orders, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", intended to be mockery is an accurate label.

In an act of grace perhaps never before or since demonstrated, Jesus gazes at those who have and are causing His suffering. We may even suggest that this gazing is not only on those before Him, but extends to all creation and all humanity. In our ignorance, the compassion of Jesus is humbling, compelling, and of course, redeeming. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

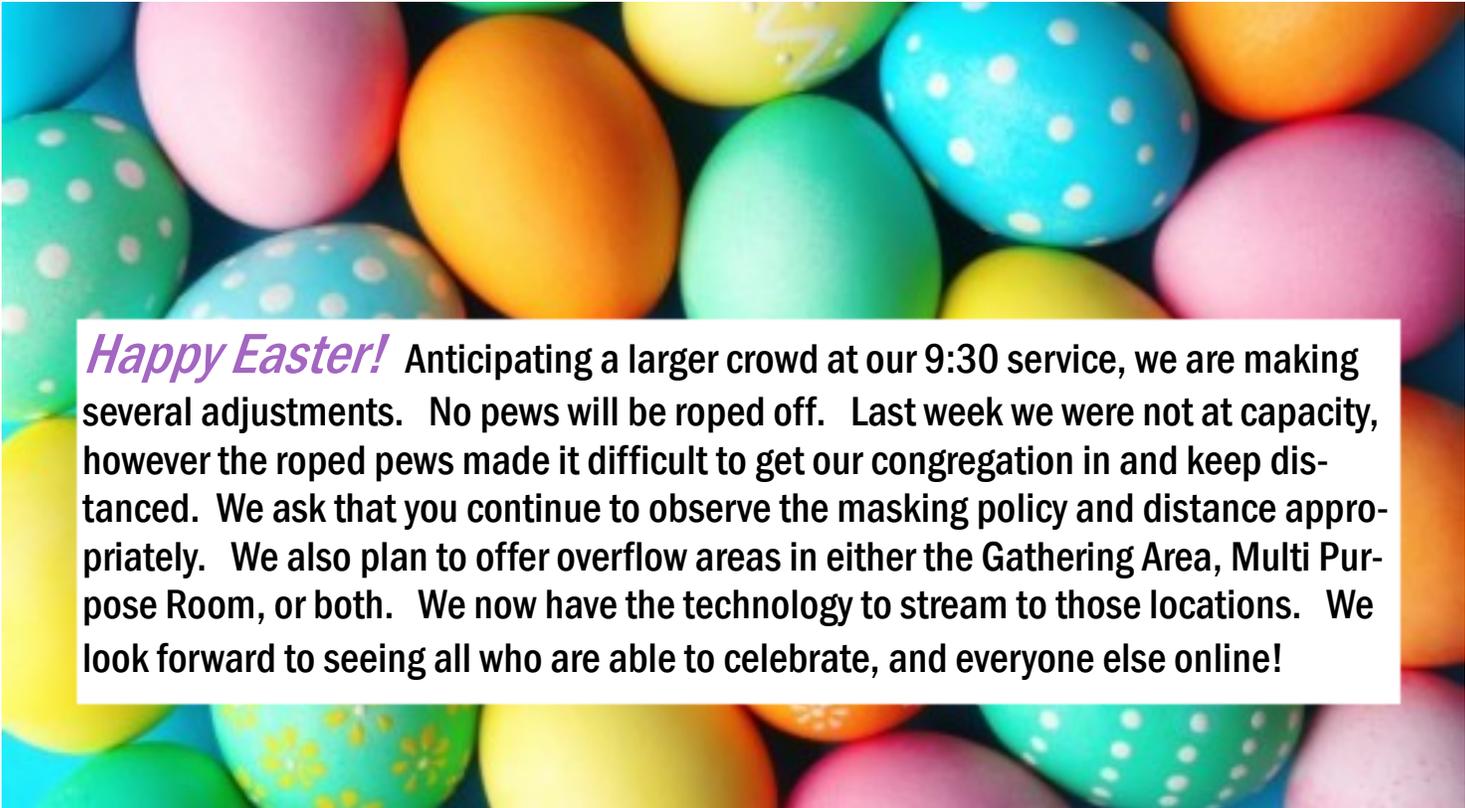
As with every step of the way throughout His ministry, Jesus is intentional, and in control. He hasn't gone to the cross against His will. He goes willingly, with no one forcing Him. No one has taken His life, He gives it as He "gives up His Spirit." He bows His head. He dies.

This is the darkness of this moment. We know that Easter is coming, and so may be tempted to forego a moment of solemnity as we remember the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. For those of us who believe and strive to live into the belief, we take joy in our salvation and the assurance and hope it provides. Yet that joy and hope come with a cost. This 24 hours represents the extremity and depth of that cost. So we take time to remember and appreciate.

The gratitude we have should not be merely for the gift of our redemption, but also for its price. Receiving a gift, after we've held it for a time can become less meaningful and the gratitude fade if we forget the love of the one who gave it, or the cost incurred. Far more valuable than any birthday or Christmas gift, far more costly, and certainly more priceless, this gift of salvation deserves, perhaps even demands, taking the time as we do each year to appreciate it.

This season of Lent takes greater gravity when we remember the time is there to instill in us preparation to embrace the soberness of these two days even as the soberness of these days give way to the joy of Easter.

May the significance of these two days inspire greater gratitude in our hearts. May it cultivate courage to live into our relationship with Jesus, leaning on Him for the courage to withstand our own trials and tribulation. May it compel us to a spirit that sees those around us, including maybe especially our "enemies", that compassion and grace are what we need to peace of heart and what they may need to see and receive Christ.



Happy Easter! Anticipating a larger crowd at our 9:30 service, we are making several adjustments. No pews will be roped off. Last week we were not at capacity, however the roped pews made it difficult to get our congregation in and keep distanced. We ask that you continue to observe the masking policy and distance appropriately. We also plan to offer overflow areas in either the Gathering Area, Multi Purpose Room, or both. We now have the technology to stream to those locations. We look forward to seeing all who are able to celebrate, and everyone else online!

BIBLE STUDY 1 Peter 2

Chapter 2 begins and continues the message of holiness begun at the end of chapter 1. It also begins to develop a comparison of the Christians to the Jewish community. A lot of reference is made to Old Testament scriptures. The reference both connects Christians to language around “God’s people” and also affirms a sense that even to Gentile Christians, the Old Testament becomes a source of credibility to who they are and who they are becoming. We know a couple things about the communities to whom the letter is written here. The verse that tells them to “rid themselves” may better translate as “as you rid yourselves”.

This is significant, particularly as it is lined up with their description as newborn infants and receiving spiritual milk. This early milk is offered as something vital and special. It is this first taste of the Lord, and they know it is good. The result is the hope that they will continue to desire it, drink it in, and grow to receive more “meaty” food as their faith deepens. It’s important to remember that at every stage of our development as Christians, each layer of “food” and growth as just as vital as any other. It’s like most anything else, we can’t get to the next level without solidifying where we are at. It is all good, and it is all critical.

This sense of “as you rid” is helpful as well, and encouraging. The language describes a process of becoming, not an end achieved. All of us are a work in progress. One of the great frustrations we can experience in our own lives, and sometimes inflict on another, is to have expectations beyond one’s means or capability. Expecting a baby to spring 50 yards or someone who hasn’t learned to write to construct a paragraph makes no sense, and in truth isn’t fair. In recognizing they are on a journey, it is both encouraging and challenging to them. They are recognized for working out what is correct. They are challenged to keep on working it out for the benefit of one another and their redemption.

We then get into language that connects the hearers of the letter directly to Christ and starts to draw us into the comparison with the Jews. Jesus is a “living” stone. This becomes incredibly important to us in our own contemporary faith. He isn’t completely fixed, dead, or unmoving. Jesus is alive, just as we call Him the Living Word we understand the scripture is alive as well. Through the ages interpretations and understandings have changed. They haven’t changed necessarily for convenience or stubbornness. Rather they change because new experience, new discovery, new eras shine new light on assumptions and presumptions. They offer new contexts in which the word has never been applied. And so that Jesus is living and not dead, responsive and not just resting, helps us, and these Christians, grasp what it is to be God’s people in whatever time and circumstance we find ourselves.

These Christians are also called “living stones” that are being “built up”. Once again we see this process of becoming. They are being built though not yet complete. They are being built into a “priesthood”. This refers back to Israel as they move from Egypt journeying to the Promised Land. They belong to God, and they are all sharing in the call to praise and glorify God. They have a mission to shine light into the world. Not a light limited to only a few, but now extended to Jew and Gentile alike. In language similar to Paul in Romans they are called to offer spiritual sacrifices. Once again, we see that their faith isn’t limited to belief. Their “priesthood” isn’t limited to simply praising God with their voices. They are called to live out their faith in sacrificial obedience to Jesus.

This stone and rock imagery is fleshed out in a way that is both hopeful and sad/disturbing at the same time. It is very clear that there are those who are in and those who are out. Those who are accepted and those who are rejected. In a world that would like to see no divisions and no exclusions, this can seem uncomfortable. In the world of these persecuted communities, however, there may be a ray of hope in this understanding.

The believer is the one rejected by the world. They are the “exile”, the mistreated and despised. They are suffering for their belief. Yet it is that very belief that makes them acceptable before God. Their faith is what puts them on God’s inside even though they are on the world’s outside. While the idea that there is a judgement and a rejection for some may be disconcerting, it is also an affirmation that there is worth and value in belief and obedience. Jesus is the stone that keeps those who trust in Him and obey from shame. He is also the rock that causes others to stumble in their disbelief and disobedience.

In other words, the standard for what is and is not sin is set by the example of Christ. Belief in Him leads to a faith that keeps us from stumbling. Rejecting Him and going our own way inevitably leads us to disobedience, tripping us up before God.

It may also be understood that the builders were the initial Jewish communities from whom Jesus sprung. Jesus came first to His own people. Much to His dismay and sorrow many refused to believe His message. If we remember in the gospel of John the “sin” that was foundational was that people wouldn’t believe Jesus was who He said He was and from there all kinds of other sin springs. Now that the gospel is being preached to the Gentiles, they also have a similar opportunity. Accept the message or reject it. Build on the cornerstone or fall over it.

Recognizing this, we begin to understand the origin of our acceptance or rejection. Never is it God’s desire to reject us. Never is it God’s desire for us to be excluded. Therefore the responsibility is on each of us. Note the language, “that the builders rejected.” All of us build a life founded on something. What that is is up to each of us. Is it Jesus or something else?

Vs. 9-10 powerfully link this sense of Christian to the Old Testament language and sense of the Jews. “Royal priesthood”, “chosen people”, “holy nation” are all terms linked to the description of the Jews in the Old Testament. The Gentiles who were not “a people” are now seen by God as “a people”. The peoplehood of the Jews was directly tied to their relationship with God. Their status as “chosen” and the expectations thereof linked them in custom, worship, and expectation of how they would live in this world.

The Gentiles on the other hand were scattered in their diverse beliefs and worship practices. They had multiple gods and multiple emphases on which gods were to be awarded the greatest tribute and honor. No longer for either Jew or Gentile. As we see in other letters of Paul there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free” In other word, all people are united as one under Christ. Faith should be more than simply a belief, it should be a unifying force that invites us to worship a common Savior, embrace a common obedience, and seek the common goal to see this message presented to the world so that all can come to faith and redemption.

While they may not have been included in the peoplehood and kingdom of the world for their faith, they were incorporated and secure in the peoplehood and Kingdom that matter: the Kingdom and people of God.

This language continues in calling them “exiles”. The Jews were now in the diaspora, scattered. Many were far from their homeland

particularly after the literal Assyrian and Babylonian exiles centuries before. The Christians, God's new "peoplehood", were also scattered and seen as outside the norm of society. The letter shifts to giving instruction as to how they should conduct themselves in a world that is hostile towards them.

Rather than buck systems and cause unnecessary trouble, in an echo of Romans 13 they are instructed to submit to authority. They are even told to honor the emperor. The point here is that they need to follow the laws of the land. Largely, the laws aren't *demanding* that they do or participate in anything that runs counter to their faith at this point. As such, there is no need to borrow trouble by acting out against the powers that be. In humbly, quietly being good citizens they short circuit any ability to be critical of them as standing against Rome or their communities. They are to be exemplary in their adherence to common laws and statutes.

Important to note is the instruction to not give in to fleshly desires. This is a host of behaviors and attitudes, some of which would cause them more trouble, so don't do them, others would ease their suffering by putting them in keeping with the pagan culture around them, so don't do them. In general terms, the flesh refers to both selfishness, which turns us away from God, as well as giving in to desires that we are not to indulge (think Paul's vice lists). Anger and frustration at their persecution might tempt them to act out aggressively, bringing consequence on their head. On the other hand, many of the moral and other attitudes that Christians held put them at odds with pagan culture. In fact they may have been so polar opposite that the virtues of the Christian were considered evil by the pagan. Refusal to participate in indulgences of the flesh, which were part and parcel in some cases even to pagan worship, were odd, and counter their idea of what the gods desire.

The simple faith that guided the life of the Christian, even those not breaking any laws and participating as good and solid citizens was enough to set them apart as odd, and even reviled.

It might seem odd to read that they are to "honor the emperor" for some. Note it says "honor", not "worship." This suggests that the letter was written at a time before the emperor instituted widespread Christian persecution. The persecution would have been more localized, which explains why this was written to specific communities of faith all connected in the same region.

The push and pull of being faithful yet good citizens and obeying the law of the land continues today. There is a balance to be struck. In our country specifically, this may be even more difficult to sort out than back then. The average person today has greater voice than the average person then in what direction our governance takes. As a result, faith can get confused with patriotism. Our politics has multiple different perspectives on what it means to be patriotic. On the far ends it can seem like patriotism is evidenced by stirring the pot when something feels incorrect, even riling up aggressive protest. The other end would be a strict adherence to a platform of policy ideals.

When these political ideals become the cornerstone of our lives and we automatically attach our faith to them, we run the risk of letting worldly values and fleshly attitudes compromise the integrity of our faith. In our unique position the reverse would be the desire. Where we have voice to affect governance, first ask "what is the Christ-centered view." The next equally important question is "how do I work towards that end in a way that honors Christ." Finally, for our faith to have integrity, we ask "is this value I espouse as Christian congruent with my other values and ideals?" The answers to "what" and "why" and "how" today may look very different than they did in first century Rome simply due to our context and the freedoms we enjoy that are far afield from their experience.

An example that comes to mind is our modern sense of Christmas greetings. Many Christians offer "Merry Christmas" as a warm and heartfelt well wishing during the season. Others, however, openly use it as a defiance and thumb in the eye of a secular culture. One is very much in keeping with this spirit in 1 Peter, the other is not. In light of the instruction to these communities, and I believe it translates through every age, our faith may have the consequence of eliciting hostility from a secular world, yet it should never knowingly or willfully be used to incite it. Doing so casts a bad light on our motives, intentions, and ability to inspire by our faith rather than offend intentionally because of it.

The end of this chapter has a strong correlation to the message from Sunday. Peter addresses their example in conjunction with their suffering. It is a given that they will be mistreated. The question is how they will deal with it. The sense of these verses is that they handle themselves with control, strength, and quietness. They don't return abuse for abuse, even in word and certainly not in deed. They will have masters that will treat them well, and those that will treat them poorly. Either way, they are to conduct themselves with grace and compassion. Why? Because this is the example they were handed by Christ. In none of His suffering did He complain or return their abuse with even verbal harshness. He was all about grace and compassion, even for those mistreating Him.

Jesus leaves the example for us to follow. Peter's hope is that this will be an example that wins over the non-believer. Suffering for doing wrong, here perhaps back talking or responding to abuse in kind, or intentionally refusing to do what is expected (so long as it isn't compromising our faith), isn't a badge of honor of any kind. It's expected and to whine about it sets a bad example. Suffering when we've done *nothing* wrong is another matter entirely. That kind of strength and conviction of faith has the power to inspire. It has the power to convict in the sense of pinging the conscience of the one dealing out the suffering for not good reason whatsoever. Perhaps this conviction will inspire them to a change of heart and a heart leaning towards faith.

The chapter ends with a humbling reminder that this compassion and grace they are to bear to those unbelieving is tied to remembering that they too were in those same shoes not long ago. They were part of the world that was now persecuting them, and by God's grace and the redemption of Christ they were drawn out of that space and into relationship with God. They had become and were continuing to become the "people of God." Just as Christ had patience and grace for them, now it was their turn to return it in kind to those around them for the intent of inviting them into a saving relationship with God. The attitude has echoes of Jesus' words on the cross "forgive them for they know not what they do."

EASTER SUNDAY

Sat, Apr 10 –Stitch 1, Pray 2 8:30am

Tues, Apr 13 –Ham Pot Pie & Coleslaw drive-thru meal

Thurs, Apr 29 – Trustees Meeting 6:30

Sat, May 1 – Food Stand & Makers Market 7-1

Mon, May 3 – Council Meeting 7pm

Calendar



Drive-Thru Meal
Tuesday, April 13, 5pm

Ham Pot Pie



Special Offering Weekly Focus

The Council has expanded the "Special Offering" calendar.

1st Sundays: Improvement Fund

2nd Sundays: Building Fund

4th Sundays: Missions

On these Sundays, the Sunday School offering will go toward these collections, and folks are encouraged to make a special donation to these ongoing needs using the envelopes

MARLON Makers MARKET
7am to 1pm
Artisan and yard sale vendors wanted!
Marlon First UMC 94 Colorado St Marlon PA marlonfirstumchurch@gmail.com

**HOME-MADE FOOD
ARTISAN GOODS
YARD SALE**

Please come prepared to respect church mask policy

Giving

Offering	\$3,282
Improvement	\$15
Building Fund	\$25
Missions	\$170
UMCOR	\$25
Meal Donation	\$20
Received to Date	\$47,453
Needed to Date	\$52,871

Prelude

Greeting and Announcements

Opening Prayer

Hymns

#302 Christ The Lord Is Risen Today
(1,2, & 6)

#310 He Lives

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Scripture

Mark 16: 1-19

Sermon

Not Counterfeit At All

Holy Communion

Closing Hymn

#322 Up From The Grave He Arose

Benediction