

May 4, 2008 Sermon

Readings: 1 Peter 4:12 - 19 and John 17:1 - 11

Prayer

Good Morning. I would like to begin by sharing a story from the history of the early Church. As most of you likely know the first hundred years of the church's history was filled with the persecution and violent deaths of thousands of Christians. One of the earliest examples of this persecution was the early third century martyr Perpetua.

Perpetua was a convert to Christianity who lived in Carthage in northern Africa. She was arrested with a number of catechists by the Romans and charged with being Christians, a crime. They faced lengthy trials, which were extended to provide more time for Perpetua to reject her faith. Perpetua and her fellow Christians refused to deny their faith and instead prayed and baptized each other.

Perpetua and her friends were sentenced to die in a coliseum by facing wild animals. Several of her friends eventually died while facing the animals. Perpetua and her closest friend, Felicitas, survived the coliseum and were taken to an executioner who was to kill them with a blade. The Romans then executed Perpetua and Felicitas. They suffered and died because of their faith in Christ Jesus.

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you... But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings... If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.” *Selections from 1 Peter 4:12-19 (NRSV)*

Those are some of the verses from today's reading from Peter's first epistle. Those verses contain some of the key elements of passage. The passage is about suffering as a Christian. One important note is that the Greek word that is used in verse 13, which is translated as sharing, is *koinonia*, which is the same word that is used in the gospels to refer to communion that was shared between Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. So the “sharing” in the suffering of Christ means more than it sounds like.

One important thing to remember about this passage is that what we do matters. The choices we make matter. They are important not only to us and those around us, but also to God. God will judge us for our actions and decisions. Also important point about this passage is the word **eschaton**.

The eschaton is the end times - the return of Christ from Heaven, the raising of the dead and judgment of all people. The word “eschaton” is a fancy theological word. This passage from 1 Timothy and much of the entire letter is talking about the eschaton and preparing for it. Many Christians in the first centuries after the ascension of Christ into heaven believed that he would be returning very soon and that the world would end. However, Christ has not yet returned. The “fiery ordeal” that verse twelve of the NRSV

translation of the passage refers to is the eschaton and the persecution that Christians were suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire.

So it is important to understand the suffering that Peter was referring to and the underlying idea of the eschaton. One of the key points that Peter is making is about suffering for one's faith in Christ. This idea of suffering goes back to the question that many believers ask - why do good people suffer? The passage gives us at least three different possible answers.

First, we must suffer as a way to test our faith and allow us to grow deeper in our belief in Christ. Second, so that our lives are linked with Christ's through shared suffering. Finally, so that we may live according to God's will; however, this does not mean that God wills for certain individuals to suffer. God created everything and this includes suffering.

There is one part of the Perpetua story that I did not mention. After she and Felicitas survived their encounter with the animals they were taken to an executioner. This is where things get complicated... much of what we know about the deaths of Perpetua and Felicitas come from a book that was written at the time of their deaths and is called *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*. According to that book when the executioner prepared to kill Perpetua he hesitated and then Perpetua guided the blade to her neck. She helped the executioner kill her.

I am not suggesting that Perpetua was not a martyr or a good Christian; however, I am suggesting that we need to remember that it is God's will and not our own that we must try to follow. Perpetua at the last moment allowed her own will to intercede and guide the blade to her neck. She did die for her faith but she also played a part in her own death.

In conclusion, I invite you to consider the story of Perpetua and Felicitas. Remember their sacrifice and the sacrifice of all the martyrs. Also, I invite you to remember what we heard from 1 Peter and the message that we must follow God's will and not our own.