

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 53:8-9
SECOND LESSON: 1 Peter 2:19-25
May 3, 2020

“Suffering for Doing the Right Thing”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Liz Schaffer is a nurse from St. Paul, Minnesota. When New York City hit the crisis point and the cry for help went out she responded. Assigned to work at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan she said, “I have never seen so many human beings in an ER at one time in my entire life. Shoulder to shoulder. It is a sight I never thought I would see. Patients are dying every day. Every single day.”

When Liz goes home to Minnesota she will not be the same person. She may even suffer from PTSD. But she willingly took on an agonizing job to help save lives. This is redemptive suffering. She chose to pay this price. And we have all heard the stories of those who have chosen to serve and died as a result. Is this fair? Is any of it fair? No, of course it is not fair, but life seldom is.

Most times in our lives suffering doesn't come with a choice. It just comes. Sometimes we have brought it on ourselves through our own wrongdoing or foolishness. Other times things happen beyond our control. But when we are suffering because the people around us are cruel or abusive, there is an obvious solution that we give people: “Leave! Quit the job. Leave the marriage. Detach from the parent, or friend, or neighbor. Don't visit that family member anymore.” We tell people this as if doing so were an easy thing to accomplish, which it never is, but at least in our world, it is possible. But there is one overwhelmingly significant factor underlying these words of Peter that we must recognize, and that is the people he was talking to HAD NO CHOICE. One could suffer unjustly and handle it well, or suffer unjustly and handle it badly. The unjust suffering was going to happen anyway. The servants he was speaking to were either slaves or freedman. Either way they had no real power. They couldn't just walk away. They couldn't just change jobs and get a new boss. It was what it was. The question was—how to cope—how to respond to an inherently bad situation in which one had no power.

The danger of taking scriptures like this out of historical context is one of the reasons why we must compare scripture to scripture. If we look at texts like this, and a few others, we can be left with the impression that to be a Christian means to be totally passive in the face of evil. A true Christian, some allege, should just let others run roughshod over them. A true Christian never challenges the power structures of the land, never campaigns against injustice,

never speaks out. But if we look at Jesus, we know that is not true. Jesus did all of those things. To the extent that we have any power or influence in society we should use it for good. There is evil in the world. There is disease in the world. There is oppression and injustice and need, and if I am in a position to either help others or remove myself from a dangerous situation, I can make that choice.

When I lived in Scotland, I met an incredibly gifted woman named May Nicholson. May started and ran all kinds of ministries to the poor in Glasgow. She was amazing. I looked her up online and until last March when she passed away from cancer at the age of 72, she was still ministering to alcoholics, addicts, homeless people and prisoners.

May was born in abject poverty in a one room tenement flat. Her father was an abusive alcoholic. Of course, she then married an abusive alcoholic and suffered from alcoholism and addiction herself. But when I met her, she was a few years sober. In those early days she had left her marriage, one in which her husband actually broke a bottle over her head and almost killed her. And do you know that there were some in the wider Christian community who criticized her for leaving? They said she should have remained in that abusive marriage and been submissive to her husband, because that's what a Christian woman should do. They would have preferred she be dead, to what she actually did, which was turn around and protect the lives of her two children and change the lives of thousands of people for good. When May Nicholson died, this uneducated salt of the earth woman with a heart for God had over 800 people at her funeral, so many that it had to be held at Paisley Abbey, and dignitaries eulogized her.

We have the freedom to make some choices in our lives. May Nicholson made choices, and thank God she did. But in the 1st century most people's lives were far more circumscribed. Peter was addressing people who were household servants. Many if not most, had pagan masters. How could they cope when the man who owned them was crooked, abusive or even violent? We might tell them to fight back. Some might even justify killing such a master in self-defense. But here's a fact of which most people today are unaware. The way the elite in the Roman Empire protected themselves against slave revolt was simple. If one slave turned and killed the master, EVERY slave owned by that master, every man, woman and child, was gathered together in an arena and put to death. This included slaves hundreds of miles away working on distant estates. If one person rebelled, hundreds of people would die.

Fighting back was not an option. Leaving was not an option. So Peter offered these servants something else. He gave them the role model of Jesus. Jesus, too, suffered unjustly, and our unjust suffering can bring us closer to Christ. When evil people hurled insults at Jesus he did not retaliate. When he suffered he did not strike back. He entrusted himself to God and bore our sins on the cross. It is possible to suffer injustice and not be destroyed by it. Jesus did. He was humiliated, beaten and crucified. But while they hurt his body, they could not destroy his soul.

Even if no other human being recognizes the truth of our situation, God does. When there is no way out, God can still give us grace to return good for evil, patience for rage, and to endure when threatened or harmed. When we

have no words because no one will hear our words, God hears and God sees. An abused child may be forced to say things she doesn't believe, but no one can make her believe them.

Suffering and powerlessness go hand-in-hand. It is having no control that makes things so much worse for us. Of course, such control is always an illusion, but we cling hard to this illusion. We convince ourselves that we are able to control every aspect of our lives. This falls apart very quickly as soon as the car breaks down, we lose our phone, or we run out of toilet paper. Our edifice of invincibility is paper thin. Add more stress and it gets worse—job loss, family troubles, a serious illness. Right now, we are up against coronavirus, but tomorrow it could just as easily be cancer. When we have tools with which to fight, we have hope. But hope fades and desperation takes over when we are told that there are no solutions. Some become bitter and enraged at the injustice. Others are able to find peace.

The suffering that Peter addressed was very specifically directed to people who could not change their circumstances to make things better. When we cannot change what is outside of us, the only thing we can change is our response to it. There is power to be found in relying on God's grace to meet every trial. Peter gives us the answer in the example of Jesus who did not respond to evil with evil. When slandered and insulted and humiliated he remained silent. Jesus entrusted himself to God as the final judge. God is the one who will settle accounts. God will always have the last word. Amen

Isaiah 53:8-9

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.

Yet who of his generation protested?

For he was cut off from the land of the living;

for the transgression of my people he was punished.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,

and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence,

nor was any deceit in his mouth.

1 Peter 2:19-25

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."

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,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.