

Joint Heirs of the Grace of Life

3- Living Hope

Acts 3:1-10

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 3:1-22

May 22, 2011

5th Sunday of Easter

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Well it is May 22 and we are still here, after the predicted end of the world that radio preacher Harold Camping forecast would come yesterday, May 21. Some of you predicted it would end on May 19, when Presbytery met here. But we are still here. Congratulations to us all for making it through! Actually I began writing this sermon on May 20, so what I just said, was on Friday a statement of faith. And that is, after all, how we are to live each day following Jesus' teaching that no human knows the day or the hour of Jesus' final return, and that we are not spend our time speculating, but rather we are to live every day in readiness.

This is true in the midst of whatever comes: tornadoes, recessions, job loss, family breakup, church unrest. We trust the magnificent affirmation of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8,

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God...What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”ⁱ

We are to live as brothers and sisters, resurrection people. Resurrection is the season in which we find ourselves, this Eastertide period of 50 days between Easter, the Day of Resurrection and Pentecost, the Day of the coming spirits. Eastertide is the most joyous season of our year as Christians, a season of victory and triumph when we are to live wide awake to the power of God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, always, no matter what suffering we face. That is the message of this short little letter from the heart of the Apostle Peter.

In this Easter Season we are studying together this letter of encouragement to persecuted believers. 1 Peter is attributed to the Apostle Peter, who may have dictated it, else it was written by a disciple very close to Peter. Peter, that bold brash fisherman who was the first to confess Jesus as the Messiah. The first, in the very next statement after that confession, to inadvertently try to deter Jesus from his destiny on a cross, for which Jesus called him Satan and told him to get behind him. Peter, who was also the first to publically deny even knowing Jesus, as he was questioned round the little campfire outside the High Priest's house the night they arrested Jesus.

But then this same Peter was among the first three to arrive at the empty tomb and bear witness to his resurrection, “Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”ⁱⁱ Not long after

that, Peter was the first to swim ashore and greet his risen Lord on the beach in Galilee. Then he was the first to preach the resurrection that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem when 3000 responded and came to faith, the first to reach out to a sufferer and do the works of the risen Jesus, when he and John were going to the Temple to worship and encountered a lame beggar looking for a handout. Peter gave the man quite a lot more than he asked for, telling him, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”ⁱⁱⁱ And the man did just that.

It is this new invigorated post-resurrection transformed Peter who now writes the struggling churches in North East Turkey, places like Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, who were suffering under the cruel persecutions of the Roman Emperor Nero. Peter writes to encourage them to hold fast to their faith through living hope, come what may.

We saw in Chapter 1 the immensity of what they have been given – a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This is our new core identity. Our core identity is not in being slaves or ship captains, women or men, but new people in Christ, citizens of heaven through the resurrection. We are to live not conformed to our lower desires but transformed by our new citizenship. Peter tells us, “Be holy yourselves in all your conduct, for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”^{iv}

We saw in Chapter 2 that we are to live as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people who have now received mercy. We are to live as aliens in this land, here for a time with our green cards, doing our best, but always aware our real citizenship is elsewhere. What God did for us in sending Jesus, in allowing him to die for us and empowering him to be raised from the dead for us, this is the rock solid cornerstone of all we think and say and do, no matter what. He writes, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.... Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, ... they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.” This is always our challenge and our command, to live not by our lower natures, to which we are all susceptible, but by our higher God-given, grace imposed natures.

As we turn to Chapter 3 today, we come to four major sections that move from domestic relationships between husband and wife, to relationships within the Christian community, to relationships where we share our hope, our faith story with any who ask, or for that matter, any who we may ask to give us a listen. All of this to relationships grounded in the work of Jesus Christ through the death he suffered, the resurrection he attained, the ascension he entered. I begin in the middle, with relations with one another within the community of faith. Note throughout, that “Relationships” is the key.

I

Peter reminds us of these five relational virtues we are to experience and express with each other at verse 8:

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for

abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.”

Peter then goes on directly and without footnote to quote from Psalm 34, a Psalm praising God for deliverance from trouble, which shows us how familiar Peter was. We should be with the Scriptures, so that they just flow out of our conversation naturally, as in verse 10 from Psalm 34:

“Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it, For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”^v

First, if we are to exhibit our new identity, if we are to live together right here at South Highland with all our differing gifts, backgrounds and interests then we must have *Unity of Spirit*. That does not mean we all think or act the same, but that we have a harmonious connection. For example, when we lift our voices together in a great hymn of faith, we transcend our individual selves and are harmoniously, both musically hopefully, and certainly attitudinally, united, together, one. “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love!”

Second, we are, Peter says, to exhibit *Sympathy*. We enter into the pain and suffering of one another. When one hurts, we all hurt. We may not be exactly in their shoes, but what they are feeling will matter to us. As John Donne put it,

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

Third, we are also to have *Love for One Another*. Scripture says that love covers a multitude of sins. Love trumps vindictiveness, love trumps judgment. I may not agree with you, you may not agree with me, but we have love for each other, and that makes all the difference. So we make space for each other. Proverbs 10:12 tells us “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” Proverbs 15:17 tells us, “Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.” When I think of the love for one another, we South Highlanders demonstrate it is truly amazing. It is wondrous. It is palpable. When one of us is in need, it is

incredible how someone comes alongside with help, spiritually, emotionally, financially, relationally. We all need each other.

Fourth and fifth, the call to demonstrate a *Tender Heart* and a *Humble Mind* brings together these two virtues for balanced hearts and minds, one with another. It is often said that some people are all heart, emotional, mushy, feelings spilling all over the place, while others are all head, analytical, rational, logical. The classic example I recall is someone who said, “Presbyterians are all little Mr. Potato Head dolls, all starched head, no body.” But we need a head that is humble and a heart this is tender. Filled with wisdom and insight, knowledgeable about God’s will discerned through God’s Word, but humble about it. Having a big head and little heart is no good. We need them both, a tender heart, balanced with a humble mind.

II

With these virtues firmly in place as we live with one another in Christian Community, we are ready to back up and reflect upon domestic relationships. How are husbands and wives to live together in that most intimate of relationships, the holy God-designed institution of Marriage? Mutual submission is the key. Hear this whole section of what admittedly is a difficult passage for us in our time and place. Verse 1 states:

“Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight. It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life- so that nothing may hinder your prayers.”^{vi}

On the surface this is one of the most difficult passages for liberated 21st Century Christian women and men to hear. In its worst interpretation it comes across justifying a patriarchal overbearing top down marriage. The Old Testament reference as stated is not particularly helpful, as not too many Western Christian Women obey their husbands, even if his name is Abraham, much less call him Lord. Any reading of the Bible must always take into account the culture and setting in which it was originally addressed, in this case to persecuted believers on the lower rung, even the slave rung, of Roman dominated society.

In its broader interpretation, however, this passage is a call to mutual submission and consideration. I can tell you that marriage is 100% a both and deal. It takes two to tango. Both

husband and wife must submit their lives to each other, looking to the cares and needs of their spouse more than their own. Both must demonstrate consideration for each other. Prayer is to be at the heart of any Christian marriage.

The call to inner beauty and not focusing on jewelry or fancy clothes is not a prohibition against a Christian looking nice and dressing up. But it is a warning against counting on the outer façade and a recognition that what is inside is what counts, the inner self clothed with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

III

These instructions on that most intimate of relationships, the marriage relationship, then move us on to the outer relationship with the world, and the importance of sharing our faith with any who ask, and recognizing that suffering is often part of our life experience. Verse 13 reads:

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.”^{vii}

We have moved during Lent through six weeks of a fresh experience in prayer and faith sharing. It was a truly remarkable time as we discovered ways we can reach out to others and share the source of our hope through our faith in Jesus Christ and the blessing we receive in this our spiritual home at South Highland. I heard some amazing experiences many of you had, from talking about faith with your customers at Walmart, to finding ways to share with your employees, yet without coercion or condescension.

Peter is saying, do not suffer for doing wrong, lying, stealing, cheating, breaking the Ten Commandments. And do not think that being a Christ follower is a free pass around all suffering. Suffering will likely come to each of us. But living hope in God will see you through. So be ready to suffer for doing good and be ready to share the source of your hope with others who so need to hear.

And do not think we ministers have it made in the shade during days of unbinding. What Susan, Jim and I all discovered is that, while we may be able to share professionally from behind this holy pulpit, we have maybe an even harder time than most of you sharing one-on-one out in a restaurant or the neighborhood. But I tried it with my barber and with a retired college professor who likes to call himself an agnostic, though I am not sure he really is one. I found opening my mouth initially was the hardest step. But I found when I did, these and others I shared with have a deep spiritual hunger. And at the same time, my own prayer life deepened significantly. Both the barber and the professor actually took me up on my invitation and

attended worship here. Faith is all about relationship with each other, with our spouse and family, with those outside the community and with God.

IV

The energy for all this comes back to that core event that brought about this new way of God with human beings, the death and the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ. Here we are back to core Christian doctrine. Verse 18:

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.”

We are reminded the Holy God-man, Jesus Christ, himself suffered on the cross in order to bring us into his new kingdom. Death could not stop him. And there is this reference about proclaiming to spirits in prison which the early Church Fathers saw as indication that during the three days between Good Friday and Easter Jesus went to the very depths of hell to proclaim release to those who languished there.

Reference is made to water, that both destroys, as in the case of the world during the days of Noah and water that gives life, as in the image of baptism, a washing of much more than dirt off the body, but a sign and a seal of our deliverance, body and soul.

Some years back the movie, *A Clear and Present Danger* brought to a broader public the novel by Tom Clancy. The phrase “clear and present danger”, described the creative evasion of public responsibility by some officers of the government of the United States, especially the CIA. In the film, the President tacitly OK’d signals intelligence and covert military action in Columbia. The motivation for these actions related to some \$650,000,000 skimmed by a friend of the president from Columbian drug cartels. There is a gripping scene I have long remembered, where the President of the United States is trying to convince one of his aides, Jack Ryan, to take the fall for him.

The President says, “Jack, you’ll take the blame. Cutter and Ritter will take some too, but it won’t amount to much, they’ll get a slap on the wrist. Then they will get \$20,000 an hour on the lecture circuit. The rest of the blame will fall on Greer. Oh yeah, you’ll take him down with you. You’ll destroy his reputation. But that’s as far as it will go. The old Potomac two-step, Jack.” And Jack Ryan says, “I’m sorry, Mr. President, I don’t dance.”

Peter urges these suffering believers, don’t dance to the world’s music. Hold true to who you are. Hold true to what you believe. Mutually submit to and show consideration for one

another. Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind, as you joyfully share with outsiders the hope that is in you, even as you suffer for him who suffered and died, was raised and ascended for you.

Someone once asked Mother Teresa, “How do you stand it? Here you are in Calcutta. You probably don’t touch more than one percent of the suffering and dying in the city.” Mother Teresa replied, “I am not called to be successful; I was only called to be faithful.” And so are you!

ⁱ Romans 8:28, 35,37-39

ⁱⁱ Luke 24:12

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 3:6-7

^{iv} 1 Peter 1:14,15

^v 1 Peter 3:8-12

^{vi} 1 Peter 3:1-7

^{vii} 1 Peter 3:13-17