

Sixth Sunday of Easter (A/RCL)
1 Peter 3.13-22
April 27, 2008
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Have you ever suffered on account of your faith, experienced pain on account of your commitment to Christ? When I was little, part of my parochial school religious education was hearing lots of stories from the lives of the saints. Many or most of them were martyrs who died ghastly deaths rather than renounce their faith or silence God's call to serve the poor or back unpopular causes. Our teachers reminded us of the courage of the saints when Ash Wednesday was approaching: **they** were willing to be boiled in oil or pierced with arrows. Were **we** willing to wear ashes on our forehead **after** we left the school building, braving the stares of curious, unchurched shoppers in the supermarket or bearing up under the scorn of irreligious teammates on the sports field?

We Lutheran Christians **are** in the minority here at the Jersey Shore, especially this little slice of it referred to as the **Irish Riviera**, but the reality is that we are Christians in a society that is predominantly Christian, at least in name. There's not a lot of overt religious persecution going on around here, at least of which I'm aware. But just because we're not being persecuted because of our **formal** religious ties, doesn't mean we're not apt to suffer on account of our faith, on account of our commitment to Christ. Have you, ever?

Today's passage from the First Letter of Peter is about suffering and salvation, fear and courage. The people to whom the letter was written were in a different boat than most of us. They were living in a place that wasn't really home to them; they were called "resident aliens," and were like folks in the U.S. who have green cards to be here temporarily. They were discriminated against first because they were **outsiders**, and second because they were **Christians**, which made them even stranger and scarier to those who didn't understand. Some of them felt so threatened by the overwhelming prejudice against them that they were getting

ready to throw in the towel and renounce the faith. This letter was meant to **encourage** them, to **comfort** them, to help them focus on the **benefits** of believing, that far outweigh the pain and inconveniences. That's a good reminder for us, on the odd occasion that we **are** made fun of or wounded for our faith....

This passage from First Peter (1 Peter 3.13) begins with kind of a silly question:

Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

I'm thinking, "Plenty of people!" Anyone who disagrees with our definition of good. Anyone who stands to lose something because of our actions. That little saying, "No good deed goes unpunished" comes to mind. Doing good isn't always all that easy or all that popular.

The letter continues,

But even if you do suffer for 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. (1 Peter 3.14-15)

"Do not fear what they fear...." "They" are the godless ones who persecute you. From the Bible perspective, what "they" fear is human punishment, physical suffering and death, the loss of that which is earthly not eternal. When we're honest, we're afraid of those things, too, aren't we? The loss of employment and of financial stability, the disapproval of friends and family, the possibility of pain and death are not appealing. And yet, when we can think clearly, when we are firmly grounded in faith, we can pray the prayer, "Lord, we can endure anything but the loss of You...."

"...[I]n your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." Live for Him. Obey His commands.

Follow His lead. Do what is good in His sight. Despite the cost. I recently heard a man tell the story of his father's failure to climb the academic ladder in a Southern college in the 1960's. His dad was a prof who had served faithfully for years, related well to students, and published as expected, but who saw one colleague after another receive the promotion he expected. He was a humble man who wasn't going to make any waves by acknowledging the fact he was passed

over time and again. His wife was outraged, though, and insisted he ask the reason. When the prof approached his department head to ask if something was lacking in his performance to explain the lack of advancement, his boss closed the door of his study and told him to sit down. He alluded to the man's involvement with civil rights marches in the area. Then he told him, "In my book, a _____ lover is no better than a _____." There was the answer to why he had never been promoted and a guarantee that he never would be either. He was professionally harmed, his career was stalled because of his eagerness to do good.

But even if you do suffer for 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. (1 Peter 3.14-15)

We're more apt to take a hit because we offend someone by cheerleading for God's unpopular children, like today's "resident aliens," than because we offend them by cheerleading for God. More people will disagree with us over the social changes faith compels us to work for, than will disagree with our theology. I'll always remember Pastor Bruce Davidson, the Director of our Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry, saying, "Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor,' not 'Blessed are the deserving poor.'" Jesus said, "When I was hungry you fed Me," "When I was naked you clothed Me," "When I was in prison you visited Me." Period. Even if you're destitute because you're mired in addiction, even if you're incarcerated because you're guilty as sin, Jesus lives in you and waits to be ministered to, through us.

"In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord" because He "suffered... to bring you to God... And baptism... now saves you." In the gracious waters of Holy Baptism Evy Yocum will come under Jesus' Lordship by being joined to His saving death and resurrection this weekend. We, the members of the family of faith that gather round her, will reaffirm our own baptism by renouncing evil and confessing the creed. We will promise to recalibrate our lives as much as necessary to worship the one true God and to sanctify Christ as Lord in both word and deed. It's

a good time for all of us to remember that “Idolatry is not only worship of the wrong god, but also it is fear of the wrong power.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 297)

“Fear that has said its prayers” is my favorite definition of courage. May Evy, may all of us, be courageous in action, strong in faith, loyal to our Savior, willing to go on record as Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit, whose faith is active in love, despite the cost, this coming week. Remember the promise:

“Even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.”

Lord, day by day, please make us willing to fear nothing and to suffer anything other than the loss of You. Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham