

“Glorify God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 17, 2020

6th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 68:4-10, 32-35

Rev. John Wahl

I Peter 4:12-19

Some of you may remember, from your days in confirmation class, being asked to memorize certain questions and answers taken from the Westminster Shorter Catechism; the first of which reads like this: *What is the chief end of man? A man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.*

Despite falling short of today's standards for inclusive language, this first catechism is quite revealing in what it does – and doesn't – prescribe. Humanity's primary aim should not be personal profit, notoriety or success, nor simply making ourselves or others happy. Our goal is not to secure a ticket to heaven. Instead the focus is on our relationship with God and how we choose to live out that relationship on earth; even as we look forward to the life to come.

As we seek to navigate life in these trying times – in the midst of a pandemic that we now know will be with us for months if not years – it is incumbent upon us to recall what, for Christians, is our primary focus. According to I Peter, suffering and times of trial – such as we are witnessing and experiencing now – are not necessary for our faith, but can be means towards a deeper faith. We should, in no way, seek out suffering but when we encounter it, we remember that as Christ himself suffered on his path to glory, so also our suffering can unite us with Christ in giving glory to God.

As the world journeys through this pandemic, perhaps we can find some solace in knowing that we are united in our suffering; that we do not face these trials alone. The universality of suffering, however, should not be mistaken for the necessity of it. In other words, suffering is not required for one to have faith, or to build on one's faith; although we sometimes find it does just that.¹

In a recent poll conducted by the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Associated Press, two-thirds of Americans said they believe God is telling

¹ Jennifer Kaalund from *WorkingPreacher.com*

humanity to change the way it lives. This does not mean they hold God responsible for causing the illness – or any resulting suffering – but maybe that an opportunity is being presented to make changes to the ways we function and make choices as a society. While most, if not all, faith communities have halted their in-person gatherings, this physical distancing has not decreased our thinking about our roles and relationships with God. The same poll indicates that over a quarter of Americans say their sense of faith or spirituality has grown as a result of the outbreak; just 1 percent say it has weakened.

Today's verses from I Peter make it clear that suffering – or, as the author calls it, the fiery ordeal – should be seen as a positive sign that Christians are replicating the ways of Jesus successfully enough to offend their neighbors. “If you are reviled for the name of Christ,” he says, “you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.” While we do not know the exact type of suffering they were encountering – mockery, criticism, or outright persecution – it is clear that the way of Jesus was not the popular or easy path.

I Peter reminds us that what is at stake in the sufferings of Christians is not so much what they *believed* but what they *did*. Because they believed that Christ was Lord, and not Caesar, they strived to establish communities that were marked by love, joy and solidarity rather than by an unjust system of patronage. Christians would be targeted for the way they treated others – with mercy and fairness – instead of playing by the established rules of hierarchy and privilege.²

The type of suffering that we encounter today may be different; Christians in the U.S. are no longer a minority being persecuted by a hostile majority. Still, we have in no way been spared from the painful reality of this outbreak: from the sickness, uncertainty, mental strain and economic upheaval. Many of us now know someone who has lost their life to the illness; most of us know people whose work puts them in harm's way. Schools have been closed and important activities canceled. We are aware that people who suffer from anxiety and depression, who are disabled or isolated are greatly impacted.

We also have learned that this pandemic has uncovered many of the flaws, gaps, and inequities of our society. Those who were already vulnerable – hourly wage earners, migrant workers, renters, and those without medical coverage – are faced with growing debt, homelessness, and health crises. Safe and available child-

² Valerie Nicolet-Anderson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

care remains a critical issue. Returning to work will not happen immediately, nor will it cure many of these underlying problems.

But, even though the conditions of suffering are different, the words of I Peter still resonate with Christians today. For, just as Christ himself led a life of selfless giving to others, so we are to join ourselves to the body of Christ in giving of ourselves for the sake of others. One aspect of this call is to avoid certain bad behaviors: murder, thievery, and making mischief. But in addition to avoiding the bad, we are also to continue doing the good: by helping others and giving when and where we can.

As it has throughout the last two-thousand years, the church is known during this time for doing good. Churches and faith-based organizations have taken the lead helping to feed people, making masks and staying in touch with elderly and vulnerable people. This congregation and its members have been supporting our local food bank, sending donations and dropping off non-perishables to be delivered. And this is only a portion of what the people of God are doing in unity with Christ, who gave of himself for the sake of all.

I Peter offers guidance on how to live out the church's vocation by humbly and eagerly seeking opportunities to do good; to live our lives in accordance with the faith that prepares us to inherit and rejoice in the kind of world for which God is preparing us. Learning to find joy in service to others whose burdens we can share attunes us to even greater joys when we come into the light of Christ's eternity.

You have no doubt seen and been inspired by the example of people who have humbly and eagerly sought opportunities to do good in these trying times. Sometimes, in comparison to such heroism, our simple acts of personal hygiene and social distancing; the wearing of masks and expressions of appreciation may seem small. And yet, the sum of these actions – done faithfully – will have a positive effect on our society. We may not understand the impact today, but without it, the path forward would be much harder.

And as God's people, whose chief aim is to give glory to and enjoy God forever, we can also use this time to pay attention to those people who believe that God is now speaking. We can listen to their stories of pain and suffering, of uncertainty and doubt, of wonder and amazement. We can sit patiently with them as they try to make some sense of a time in this world where everyone – and yet the vulnerable more than anyone else – has been impacted by this pandemic. We

can walk alongside them as they seek to take steps toward growing a faith that originates not in the suffering but may grow deeper in response to it. We can pray for those who are now facing fiery ordeals that they might find in Christ a companion in their pain and a peace that surpasses human understanding.

And so, this chief aim which is outlined in the catechism is not unlike the greatest commandment in that both have two parts: 1) giving glory to God and 2) enjoying him forever; 1) loving God and 2) loving others. The way that we act out our love for God, the way we give glory, is by enjoying the common life that God has gifted us. In these painful, trying days, we remember more than before that we are in this together. If we are to fully engage in and enjoy life, then we must help one another: feeding and housing, loving and respecting, supporting and encouraging. As God's people, we do not suffer alone; we are truly in this together; on this and every day. Amen.