

May 10 message

The epistle of 1st Peter is filled with much that we can apply to our own lives these days. But first let's take a quick look at the times it was written.

Bible scholars have concluded it was written around 62-64 A.D. Peter was probably in Rome, not prisoned yet for his proclaiming of the gospel. Yet it was a very difficult time for the new followers of Christ, called "Christ-ones." Many were being tortured and killed for their faith. This was the beginning of the persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero.

It was under these circumstances that Peter wrote this letter of encouragement to scattered Christians everywhere. Three weeks ago I spoke a bit about chapter 1 when Peter tells how we as followers of Christ are like foreigners living in a strange land. He tells how we are different and must be on our guard against what might be customary and accepted in a culture that does not know Christ. Today we learn more of what Peter instructs. We live in a time and place where we can worship without the threat of persecution thanks to the hard fought freedoms we enjoy yet there are many deterrents to faithful living that Peter addresses.

We've all heard "Life is hard and then you die" or something like it. All people face hardship throughout their lives some more than others, when one chooses to follow Christ that doesn't change. There are new challenges one can face.

I read a story this week about a man we'll call George. George is now an established, reliable accountant in the city he lives. He has built a reputation for his honesty and integrity. George is also a follower of Christ and has found that there can be conflicts between his work and his faith.

George had worked for a real estate development company. Over time, George noticed that the company was grossly inflating its cash flow and profits. He concluded the plan was to mislead the company's investors. He decided it was time to make a stand. He discovered that his integrity and faith to those above him didn't matter. His supervisor told him that they did not want to hear another word

about his findings. Then he lectured him about his unrealistic expectations and how he was working in the real world. George resigned not knowing what would happen to him, but knowing he had done the right thing in the eyes of the Lord.

Examples like this happen all the time. Perhaps you have been in a situation where your faith told you something was wrong. It can be a tough call when one has to make a stand because it goes against what the Bible teaches.

The advice Peter gives in our reading today goes against much of what the world teaches. Just the first two verses are so contrary to what we see today. “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Most would agree that we see less compassion in our culture today. As a sociology student at one time, I wanted to look into this and perhaps understand what is happening that makes it this way. After some research I found these three findings in one study from the John Templeton Foundation. 1) As the number of people suffering increases, our ability to feel and act compassionately often decreases. This is called, “compassion collapse” and it happens because our empathy and resources are finite. People have concluded that suffering is widespread and it feels overwhelming, and many have decided their actions won’t matter.

I can relate to this and perhaps you can too. Much too often we look at all is wrong with the world and conclude there isn’t much we can do. Yet we know better. What we do to help even one person can have tremendous results. Here’s an example: A nine year old girl was at the checkout with a carton of eggs and a loaf of bread, praying the “declined” light wouldn’t flash on her mom’s card. The cashier said, “Congratulations! You’re our 10,000th customer! Everything in your cart is free.” Well, her mom didn’t believe that story and went back. Turns out, the cashier had swiped her own employee discount and paid the balance with her own money. That one moment of grace kept her family fed during one of their

hardest months. We've all heard stories like that of someone helping someone. Perhaps we've even done that. Two years on my way back from Canton IL where I attended a church meeting, I stopped at a gas station to get a snack. I don't know why I picked that certain gas station, there were others to choose from but for some reason I did. At the counter was a young man counting out his change that he must have saved for gas. On my way back to my car, I gave him a 5 to help out. He was very appreciative. Now as we know, 5 isn't much but it helped and it made a difference. And that's what we need to remember of course. We can't solve all the world's problems but we can help someone out. I often feel that those opportunities don't just happen by chance, there is divine intervention.

2) Life today has its focus on individualism and constant information from various media, which makes it harder to connect with others' struggles. Constant news cycles and social media often numb us to large-scale suffering, often making it harder to respond.

It seems like there is always some kind of disaster, some which are weather related. We get overwhelmed with the news. Sometimes though something happens close to where we live and we do see faith in action. Most news broadcasts and other media make it a point to share positive news. There are a lot of followers of Christ trying to live out their faith. They have in the words of verse 15 "Set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts." This is a whole-being commitment to Jesus. Jesus becomes the foundation for faithful living and witness. Basically Peter is saying, 'decide around whom or what you will center your life. Will it be to conform to what our culture deems important, or our jobs, or the accumulation of possessions and wealth, to name a few, or will we center our lives in Jesus. As in most things, a firm resolution is needed to see things through to overcome adversity or any obstacle in their path. Being a true follower of Christ is like that. We place our full confidence in the Lord. And there are still many who follow what Christ taught. There are many who volunteer and give of their time, talent, and resources to be of service to others. Much too often we forget that. I see a lot of that here, but as we all know there is more that can be done.

3) While many religious traditions emphasize compassion as a core virtue, people feel disconnected from these teachings due to their own personal struggles and pressures and disillusionment from traditional institutions like the established church.

Yes, generally speaking church attendance and membership is on the decline. But I have noticed a change in people's willingness to speak to others about their faith. I grew up in a time where everyone basically knew what denomination friends and neighbors belonged to. It was rare to speak to those we knew about their commitment to their faith. I suspect it was much the same around here. Recently I learned a neighbor of ours had kind of dropped out of regular worship at the church they had attended. I learned how they had started attending somewhere else. It happened because someone there invited one of them to participate in the bell choir. She found enjoyment in this activity and soon both were attending. This is not an isolated incident. I see more and more people willing to talk about their faith struggles hoping to find a listening ear and some direction. Opportunities can present themselves all the time. It may be something like, "well, I was raised in the church but life got busy and I drifted away." It's important we recognize those times when others open up to us a bit and share.

Often we may think we're not up to the task. But as our gospel reading points out, we are not on our own. We are not orphans fending for ourselves. We have the Holy Spirit to guide and council us. Some Bibles use the word "advocate" to describe the Spirit. The original Greek word also incorporated our concepts of "comforter," "champion," and "counselor." It meant "to call to one's side." In the Greek legal system, people were allowed to take a counselor with them to court. This person didn't plead their cases for them, but stood beside them.

Hopefully this gives us a new insight into what God provides for us in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always with us even when we might ignore it. Again, we are not left as orphans; Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to stand beside us in our need. One of our duties then is to be more open to sense the Spirit of God with us.

This will help us recognize the folks God sends our way and the work ahead of us.
Amen.