

Fear Not

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Fear Not

1 Peter 3:8-17 and Job 11:13-20

Two weeks ago, I got to experience something wonderful. I spent five mornings with over 170 children and 80 teen and adult volunteers. It was Barefoot School and it was glorious. My favorite part of the day, though, was the closing ceremony. For those of you not familiar with our Barefoot School program, the closing ceremony takes place at the end of the morning. All the kids and their leaders gather in the Fellowship Hall – after a morning full of playing games, doing crafts and hearing the Bible story. Everybody sing songs from the week and is encouraged to jump up and down and have a great time. Then the song leader recaps the day and includes the daily Bible Point. Now this is important-- The daily Bible Point is short, so that the kids can remember it easily. And the kids usually have some type of response when the daily Bible Point is said. This year's response was, "Fear Not!" because we were teaching the kids to fearlessly shine God's light in the world. So for instance, one of the daily Bible Points was "God is powerful." And the kids responded with a loud, "Fear Not!" And let me tell you, by the third day of the leader saying the Bible Point and the kids catching on and shouting "Fear Not!" it was loud. The kids were excited and the volunteers were excited and I was excited. And as I listened to the kids shouting, I reflected on how much work had gone into that moment. The Barefoot School Leadership Team and I had been meeting and planning for a long time. It had been a lot of work. But the outcome was so worth it. I wouldn't have traded hearing those kids shouting for anything....(pause) The Christian life is similar, I think. It's a whole lot of work, but the outcome is so worth it. Let me explain...

We just heard a passage of scripture about living as a Christian. And the passage sets the standard high, doesn't it? It gives us a long list of virtues that we are expected to be characterized by. First Peter asks us to have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. We are to live in harmony with each other; not repaying evil for evil or abuse for abuse. We are to repay evil with blessing. We are to be eager to do good. We should expect to suffer for doing that good. And in the face of suffering, we are to not fear, to sanctify our hearts, and be able to defend our faith – with gentleness. And why? Because Christ suffered. He was righteous and he suffered for us, the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God. And because we follow Christ, we should expect the same treatment that he received. We may be treated unjustly because we follow Christ. We may endure unjust suffering because we follow Christ. The intended audience of First Peter was certainly dealing with unjust suffering.

The letter is addressed to Gentile Christian converts scattered all over the rural interior of Asia Minor, in the regions of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Today we know

it as Turkey.

Christians here were a minority group made up of resident aliens and outsiders. They had been displaced from their homes and had found themselves in slavery. The society around them was largely pagan. For Christians to worship only one God instead of the many pagan gods made it nearly impossible for them to fit into society. When a person became a Christian in this society, they were forced to depart from the cultural norms around them; it made them an outcast. To become a Christian was to isolate yourself from the larger society. In the lives of these Christians, danger was all around them. They faced constant local harassment and persecution. The writer of 1 Peter, probably not Peter the apostle, was afraid that the harassment and persecution these Christians faced was so great that it would weaken their faith and their witness. In those days, there weren't churches on every corner. There probably weren't church buildings at all. Christians usually gathered in homes. Because of the persecution Christian communities were usually somewhat isolated from one another.

This letter was socially important. It addressed how the Gentile Christian converts should behave and act in a society that was not their own. In the first few chapters, 1 Peter instructs the believers who are slaves how respond to their masters and how husbands and wives are to treat one another. What is central to these instructions is the suffering and death of Jesus. 1 Peter holds this as the key to understanding suffering in life. Christ suffered, so we as Christians should expect to suffer. The first readers of 1 Peter were suffering, also, and this letter instructs how they should live while they are enduring suffering and persecution.

Now you may be thinking... I'm not a slave and I don't have a master and I'm nice to my spouse and treat them well. And I'm not in a minority group in my community. What does this passage have to do with me?

You may not be a slave, but you may find yourself in some situations where you need to answer to someone superior to you – a master, if you will. And that superior may not be the kindest person in the world and may criticize you or say something hurtful. So how to you respond? Do you talk behind their back or make a snide or offhanded comment because of your frustration? Or do you hold your tongue?

You may be kind to your spouse, but is there another relationship in your life that is having problems? A person you can't forgive?

You may not be suffering as the first hearers of this letter were suffering, but all of us suffer in some way or another. To suffer means "to submit or be forced to endure." It also means "to undergo or experience". This definition matches the audience that 1 Peter is addressing. The letter is written to Christians who were slaves and were suffering from physical beatings and verbal abuse of their masters. It's what most people think of when they hear that people are suffering. But suffering is more than that. It is also allowing things to happen. In the King James Version, Jesus tells the disciples to, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus was telling the disciples to allow the children to come to him.

So suffering means that we submit to something and experience something and we allow that something to happen, no matter if it is good or bad. But we usually think of suffering as a bad thing, don't we? And because we think of it as bad, we are sometimes afraid to face it. What is it that you are suffering in your life? What is it that you are afraid of? Maybe it's the current financial situation or a situation at your work. Maybe it's a family situation. Whatever it is, whenever you get into that situation and become overwhelmed with suffering, I want you to think of that response from the kids at Barefoot School – "Fear Not!" Those kids were confident that God would be faithful no matter what. Maybe we should take a lesson from them. (pause)

The Christians Peter was writing to were suffering, yes. They were suffering for their faith because they were Christian. That's why Peter instructs them not to fear, not to be frightened. He tells them to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that they have in Christ. Suffering for being a Christian wasn't something that these Christians were supposed to be afraid of; they were to strive to "do good" – to live well, to tell others about their faith – and not worry about anything else. They had the promise that God would take care of them in their suffering. And we have that same promise.

So how do we suffer for our faith? We live in a country where we are free to worship as we choose; free to believe what we choose to believe. We don't necessarily "suffer" for our faith... or do we? (pause) How many times have you been in a situation where you wanted to say something but didn't because you were afraid of what people would think? Maybe there was trouble at work and you thought of how the sermon from last Sunday might relate, but didn't speak up? Or maybe you were waiting in line somewhere and the person in front of you was getting really impatient and irritated and was mentioning under their breath how inept people were and looking at you for approval and you didn't say anything for fear of upsetting them further? I think our culture encourages us to be so tolerant of everyone's feelings and opinions that we are afraid to speak the truth when it needs to be spoken. And maybe that's one way we suffer. Because we continue to allow situations like this to happen. What if we stopped being afraid of what we believe and became like the kids from Barefoot School and started shouting it out loud? What would happen? Would our society be shocked if Christians suddenly started to be bold and radical in their faith? Would our society even notice? Do we have such boldness? Are we willing to be so bold in our faith that people would question why? And when people questioned why, would we have an answer? Would we be able to explain to them what we believed and why we believed it? And if we can't, why not? What keeps you from sharing this great faith with others? Fear of what they will think? Fear of not knowing what to say? Think about it.

It's a struggle to live faithfully and not be afraid of the repercussions. God does ask a lot of us through 1 Peter. Listen to the list again: We are to live in harmony with each other, to love everyone, have a tender heart, and be compassionate and humble. To repay evil with blessing. To be eager to do good. Expect to suffer because Christ suffered. To defend our faith in the face of suffering.

Fear Not

Why should we do all of this? Peter says , “that we might inherit a blessing.” Maybe the blessing to be inherited was similar to the blessings in Job. That if you devote your heart to God, you will stand without fear. You will forget your trouble and be secure. You will rest with no one to make you afraid.

The Christian life is a lot of work, but the outcome is so worth it.

Thanks be to God.