

September 13, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 21 1 Peter 4:1-9

Dearly Beloved;

This pastoral note is meant to keep you up to date on what is happening at St. Andrew's. The writing of this note takes place on Saturday. I have just arrived home from a work meeting of the Session preparing the sanctuary for worship next Sunday (the 20th). We removed all paper materials from the pews, including Chorus Books, Praise Books and Bibles. This step has been taken for your safety should you choose to participate in worship on the 20th. There are 18 pods in which you may sit. Sit in front of the green taped areas. Do not cross a taped off barrier. It has to do with providing safe distancing. Sit with people from your household. Please, please follow instructions and read posted signage. The six foot rule will be in affect and so will the wearing of masks. We are required by the government mandated Public Health guidelines to take attendance and to make sure we have the necessary tracking records for every service. There will be no singing because Covid-19 is spread by our breathing. But there will be music played by Sherry Mayhew, and she and I will be trying to make sure the choices we make in that area are recognizable. She will, for a while at least, be the sound of our praising the Lord, with sacred songs and choruses. The sermon will be shorter than what you have been accustomed to, because interior experiences are by their nature, less safe than experiences that are done out of doors. As it turns out, the forecast is for moderate temperatures for the next two weeks. In other words the sanctuary should be comfortable. You may

want a jacket or a sweater in case it is actually cool. I can tell you we are attempting to prepare for a “safe” communion service. I will update you on that in person. If the details come together the first Sunday in October will be Communion Sunday. We will all need to be flexible about that, but there was a time when I thought we would not be doing Communion for the next year. Progress and grace appear to be prevailing. If the Communion “kits” arrive, it will be safe, in that only you will touch the elements you receive. A number of our people continue to wrestle with cancer treatment, and some who have been with us in the past, have become cancer patients during this pandemic. Please remember them in your prayers. You do not need their names to do so. With that let us turn to the word....

The passage from 1st Peter 4 speaks to the whole theme of the fact that we have been from the beginning of our faith journey witnesses of the grace of God. The witness in the whole catalogue of the Biblical word, is a person who has seen things occur. You have witnessed the effectiveness of prayer for the sick among us. You have witnessed events that made it clear we were blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of both positive and negative experiences. You and I have witnessed the fact that the love of Jesus Christ for us and for the stranger, whom we did not know, creates real bonds in the midst of fellowship and worship.

Peter begins this 4th chapter by talking about suffering. “Therefore since Christ suffered in his body, arm

yourselves with the same attitude.” (1Peter 4:1) I cannot think of a better text to be examining as we end this series of messages, and yes, it is the longest series I have ever prepared! What is Peter saying? First of all he is reminding us that Jesus suffered during HIS ministry, and of course at the precious and marvelous cross. Peter reminds us that those confrontations that Jesus had with those who disagreed with HIM and HIS approach to the faith life, were not easy for HIM to bear. Words can be very hurtful. In HIS humanity it is unreasonable to think that Jesus did not take criticism and hostility personally. HE was here in this world in the flesh to save people, to bring God to them and to us. HE suffered when those who ought to have been his allies (religious leaders of several stripes) were so obviously opposed to what HE was here to accomplish.

And then of course there is Calvary. Don't ever think it did not hurt when Jesus was abused. They slapped HIM. They handled HIM roughly, trying to remind HIM who was really in charge, and who really wielded power in this world. His flesh was like our flesh. When He was bruised it hurt. When they split his lip with an unexpected blow (we would call it a sucker punch) it hurt. When HE was whipped, HE bled. Medical experts have speculated HE lost at least half of HIS blood supply by volume. It was severe pain. HE fell under the burden of the cross on the way to HIS crucifixion, not because HE was a weak man, but because HE had been weakened, wounded severely. HE was a dead man walking the road of sorrows.

And then the cross itself. Imagine crude spikes being driven through your wrists, which at the time was considered part of the hand, and was meant to permit the maximum pain in the whole experience of crucifixion. Nails through HIS feet, so that HIS ability to move was minimized. That means trying to breathe became painful. We have heard so much about a man's last cries of "I cannot breathe," this summer. Jesus suffered as he tried to breathe. And then the shut down of organs and organ systems as death happened. Crucifixion was not just designed as capital punishment, it was designed to make death painful, torture. Jesus suffered. And Peter, who in his own right suffered for being a follower of Jesus and a leader of believers says to us... "the Lord suffered in his body. Arm yourselves with the same attitude."

We are tempted to look for someone to blame for our current circumstances. We cannot see the Covid-19 virus with our eyes. It is tempting to take out our frustration and even our anger on people in authority, who have the power to make decisions that threaten to control us and what we can and cannot do. And even how we may do what we do! You have no idea how much I want to complain about the fact that we won't be singing the words of hymns and choruses next Sunday! I have to laugh at myself. It is nothing like the pain of the scourge, the pain of the nails, the pain of being unable to breathe, and still being alive to feel the agony.

Peter is saying, Jesus suffered. Arm yourself with the attitude Jesus had. Life involves pain and suffering. I

received word that John Mercer's remains should arrive back in Canada via Toronto and dissolved into tears, and found myself back in the heartache of last winter. And the temptation immediately to ask, Lord why did you have to take my friend? Arm yourself with the attitude Jesus had, Morley! Remember the conversation on the road in Galilee? Jesus said, "We are going to Jerusalem." The disciples, and you could put money on the idea, Peter among them, said, "That's not a good idea!" Jesus says, "Jerusalem. This is why I came." What Jesus did was he embraced the concept that you cannot truly live, if you want to live pain free. The only way around grief for the loss of my friend...no, my brother...is to have never known him. To have never served St. Andrew's Stirling. To have never tasted the love and the support of my church family. Embrace the truth. Life is not and never is, has been, or will be, pain free. You have witnessed that. We have a number of cancer survivors in the church family. We have numbers of people who have faced grief that makes mine look like a cheap imitation. Embrace the attitude of Jesus. We are alive and still here on earth. There are going to be moments when it hurts to be alive. We are eternally alive in Jesus, through faith, and that does mean we are going to make some decisions, some choices, do some things that are going to be painful. Suffering is part of the package of saved by faith through grace from God. We have seen it. And we have tasted the bitter pill. Peter who always seemed to learn the hard way, says, "Arm yourselves with the same attitude."

This is really important. Peter was not saying, seek out and pursue circumstances in which you will get hurt. He is rather addressing a simple, (which I am ever pointing out does not mean easy, it means singular) so, he is addressing a singular reality. Life cannot be lived without the experience of pain. A maple tree fell on our acre during the Spring. Matthew and I cut it up for firewood and I engaged in the activity of splitting it. I love splitting wood with an axe. I got a really good blister on the inside of my thumb (a) because my hands are soft and (b) as a result of loving the activity I stayed at it too long. And (c) I found out I had made a blister, when it broke. Real ouch! What Peter is saying to believers is, embrace that truth, that pain is part of living, and therefore it won't surprise you to the point where you question what God was doing, when the raw pain hits. That is why he goes on to say, "he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." We may do a dance and shake our blistered hand, but we are less likely to turn it into a faith crisis, by looking for someone to blame for what we essentially did to ourselves. We make choices. And the truth is there are times when we just do not see the consequences until the truck has gone by and someone is bleeding on the highway.

And that leads us into verse 2...and with this I will conclude. If we arm ourselves with the attitude of Jesus, namely that it is going to rain on us, whether we knew the weather report or went out on a sunny day with no idea of what was going to happen, we are more likely "to live the rest of our lives" seeking not something for ourselves, but rather, "the will of God." Because that was the essence of Jesus

attitude. HE embraced that HE was here on earth to do the will of HIS Father. May we be so blessed, come what may. I do know this and I believe that you do to, that dealing with life as a gift from God in which we may serve HIS marvelous will, we receive something that you cannot buy in any store or on Amazon....peace. Peace, even in the midst of suffering. Even in the midst of terrible loss. And remember this: peace does not mean the pain is not real. Peace means we do understand how we arrived in the midst of pain filled times. We have been doing what God the Lord wants us to do.

I hope to see you in the flesh next Sunday. Do remember that if you are not able or are uncomfortable with the risk of that experience, you will find the message here on the web site. God loves you, and so do I. We are witnesses.

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus, lead us every day, every hour, every minute that we are able to draw breath and do. Walk with us and talk with us. Remind us that your Spirit is within us. Guard those of us who will gather inside the sanctuary of St. Andrew's next Sunday. Be with our beloved brothers and sisters who will not be able to be there. We are living in a time of plague, Lord. Help us to be at peace with the decisions and choices we make. Continue to bond us to one another in love generated by faith in YOU. Amen