

I hopped in the car yesterday morning
And turned the radio on
And jumped in at the middle of an interview with this author
Who was describing her most recent fictional novel

And she said something that made my jaw drop to the floor:
“I’m fascinated by Catholicism, cults, suicide bombers...
You know, all kinds of ideological extremism...”

And I was like, “Wait! What???”
Did you just put the Catholic Church in the same
Category as ISIS and Al-Qaeda and people like David Koresh?
And then the story just casually went along
As if what the author was saying wasn’t completely bonkers

It would be like if I said:
“I’m so inspired studying great leaders throughout history...
You know, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Adolf Hitler...”
Whoa! Come on lady! One of these things is not like the other!

The way she lumped the Catholic Church into the same category as terrorists
Is consistent with what we’ve been discussing since the beg. of August
In this sermon series called *Outsiders*
Increasingly, Xians are seen as irrelevant (we don’t matter or add value)
And extreme (meaning that we are actually seen as dangerous)

What we have found as we’ve been in this series
Is that we are not the only people who have found ourselves
In a pickle like this
Throughout history, there have been seasons where
Xians are a minority movement, misfits within the society of their time
And it seems to be true, that we are at our BEST when this is the case

So, rather than lamenting our changing role in society
We are opening up the Scriptures
To find courage, to gain perspective and to renew our hope

(Open to 1 Peter)

Peter has written this letter to Xians who have likely fled persecution in Rome
They've been scattered throughout Asia Minor
And are living in communities where they stick out
B/c they don't participate in the social constructs surrounding idol worship
Christians are <1% of the population of the Roman Empire
Some of their brothers/sisters in Christ have been killed for their faith
And they are all undergoing some kind of social hostility

Today in our reading, Peter talks explicitly about the topic of suffering
A topic the community was well-versed in

Our reading this week: **1 Peter 4:12-19 (Pew Bible p. 1891)**

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Every year since Emily and I have been married

We have celebrated Christmas with her family and with my family
Since both are in town (and both attend Asbury)
So, what we often do is spend the night at my in-laws on the 23rd
Spend the 24th with them, go to church Xmas Eve
Spend night with my folks and then spend Xmas Day with them

And while I ADORE my family and my in-laws

I am completely peopled out by about 4 o'clock on Xmas Day

As an introvert, I am just done talking to people for a while

So I start hiding in the bathroom just to be alone—that kind of thing

So, my lovely wife, knowing how I am wired

Helps me start emotionally budgeting for the people-fest of Christmas

In early December (more alone time, less talking, etc.)

It's no surprise that Xmas is coming coming—but I do have to prepare

In a similar (but completely different way), Peter says to the church:

You shouldn't be *surprised* when you suffer as a Jesus-followers

This is not an anomaly; in fact, you should start emotionally budgeting for it

Peter doesn't blow smoke or give them false hope

He doesn't preach some health and wealth prosperity gospel to them

He doesn't say their suffering is b/c they're sinning or don't have faith

He is saying suffering is NORMAL for people who sign up to follow Jesus

And then he gives them the strangest advice:

When this happens, when you suffer & are persecuted as a Xian

REJOICE—celebrate—throw a party

“If you're insulted b/c of the name of Christ, you are blessed.”

Peter got this advice straight from Jesus' most famous teaching (SOTM)

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you,
persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”*

Peter/Jesus use the term “blessed” VERY differently than how we use it today

I did a search on twitter for **#blessed**

A couple examples of what I found [Seth: One at a time—lower 1/3 if possible]:

My wife made chorizo breakfast burritos for lunch. #Blessed

Omg my hair looks so good today #blessed

Today, I bought an entire pizza for 6 dollars. #blessed

If the early church had social media

Their posts might be like this:

Got beat up for saying Jesus is Lord. #blessed

Neighbors vandalized our house b/c we wouldn't worship Nero. #blessed

Tomorrow's my big day to witness for Jesus at the Coliseum! #blessed

These are the times when Jesus & the Apostles say you are truly blessed.

And you know what's incredible

Is that the early church believed and embraced this in a very real way

In the year 203, two young women from the N. African city of Carthage

Were arrested by the Roman government

For converting to Christianity

They were catechumens—people in a period of discipleship/training

Sometimes lasting several years leading up to their baptism

Perpetua was of noble birth, the daughter of a prominent pagan man

She was a widow and had an infant son

Felicity, her sister-in-Christ, was a slave woman & almost full-term pregnant

In prison and awaiting their death, the women were in deplorable conditions

And yet they felt honored they had been given the chance to witness for X

Perpetua's father visited her and begged her to recant her faith

She said, "Do you see that pot? Can it be called by any other name than what it is?" 'No,' he replied. 'So also I cannot call myself by any other name than what I am—a Christian.'"

The other woman, Felicity, was afraid that Romans would not let enter the arena

While she was still pregnant

So she and the church began to pray that she would deliver the baby

Before she was scheduled to be thrown to wild animals in arena

She didn't want anything to keep her from the privilege of martyrdom

A few days before the games began, she went into labor

And as Felicity cried out in pain, giving birth in the prison

Someone taunted her & asked how she'd endure the pain in the arena & she said:

“It is I who suffer now, but there will be someone in me in the arena who will suffer with me, because I will be suffering for him.” (child to her sister)

A few days later, they were led to the coliseum

A firsthand account said Perpetua and Felicity entered the arena
“Joyous & of brilliant countenance”

The Romans let loose a wild cow to maim them, but it didn't kill them

So they sent out an executioner

The women stood side by side and hand in hand

And the guard trembled with fear at their unearthly joy and poise

They stared into his face, in total control in the moment

And before he took their lives

They spoke to the church: “Stand fast in the faith & love one another.”

The women rejoiced in their suffering, proud to bear the name “Christian”

Felicity's words of “one who is suffering with me b/c I suffer for him”

Helps us understand Peter's words about

Participating in the suffering of Christ

The early church believed that there is a power

That is unleashed when a believer has the honor

To identify with Christ in suffering and persecution and even death

Which explains the prayer of Paul in Philippians 3:10

“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

The church rejoiced in suffering b/c it was an honor to carry the name of X

And so, Peter can say, *“If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”*

There are two kinds of suffering in this life:

Natural Suffering- a kind we will all endure (sickness, death, loss)

Voluntary Suffering- this is suffering that can be avoided

Sometimes, we suffer when we choose to do something wrong (laws)
Civic (I got a ticket), social (speaking ill of a friend & they find out)
Spiritual laws (I put people & things in front of God & life didn't work)
Sometimes we suffer b/c we do something wrong

But other times, we suffer when we do something RIGHT
And because the world has gone so wrong, so far off course
We're ostracized/hated (or...) for clinging to what's good/right/pure

Jesus: (Jn. 15) "If the world hates you, keep in mind it hated me first."

This is the suffering that Perpetua and Felicity endured

This is the kind of suffering that brothers/sisters in Christ
Around the world, even today, undergo because they follow Jesus

The church in Nigeria is undergoing voluntary suffering

As they are being targeted by terrorist group Boko Haram

Our brothers/sisters in Christ in Russia are suffering

As they covertly share their faith with others
In spite of harsh rulings by the government against proselytizing

And even in the US, in Charleston, SC

Members of the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church
Suffered when a 21-year-old entered the church and opened fire
In the middle of a Bible study

To follow Jesus is to choose suffering & even DEATH as the way to find true life

Jesus: "*If anyone would come after me they must deny themselves...*"

Paul: "*I have been crucified w/X and I no longer live but X lives in me
And the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who
Loved me and gave himself for me.*"

All who follow Jesus have chosen to walk the road that leads to suffering
Whether true suffering ever happens

It may be the case that one day we will know what it means to suffer for our faith
Ones among us may even some day give their lives for Christ
& on that day, we are to rejoice at the honor of identifying w/X in suffering

We may not all be given the honor of *suffering* for our faith
But we are all given the opportunity to *sacrifice* for our faith

And as followers of Jesus, we are *called* to
Deliberately, habitually and joyfully
Put ourselves in positions of sacrifice for the sake of Christ & his kingdom

There's a story of Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian
Walking through St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican
With the Pope in the 12th century
The Pope was proudly showing off the wealth of the city
And remarked to Aquinas:
"The church can no longer say "Silver & gold have I none..."

And Aquinas replied: "Yes, but neither can we say to the lame, in the name of
Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk."

Perhaps church has lost its power b/c we have lost what it means to sacrifice

Haven't you ever wondered why we hear stories of healing, revival, divine action
In places like Africa, Latin America and the Middle East
And almost never hear them here in the US?

Might it be that the power of God is unleashed in a unique way
When the people of God are deliberately, habitually, and joyfully
Putting themselves in a position of sacrifice for the sake of Christ?

This isn't sacrifice to earn salvation, but a response of love to him who died for us
We may not all suffer, but we all have the opportunity to sacrifice.

Here are 6 practical ways that we can choose sacrifice:

1.) Fasting

It was the practice of the early Methodists to fast every Wed/Fri until dinner
Fasting reveals our needs (which so often we protect ourselves from)
Fasting puts us in a place of increased desperation
This is something I've been thinking about for myself
But haven't really wanted to admit out loud

2.) Generosity

I probably should have put generosity as #1 on the list
Because perhaps more than any other area of our lives
Money holds a unique place of power over our hearts
When was the last time you gave that really hurt?
When was the last time you gave & thought "it's too much...?"

Jesus: You can't serve God and money
Some of us need to start giving sacrificially to send a strong message
To our heart that we will serve God alone

3.) Hospitality

You could make the case that Jesus built his ministry on hospitality
On sharing meals with people he wanted to know God loved them
How beautiful would it be if the church were to grow around the table?

Because people who loved Jesus began to open their homes
To neighbors, to strangers, to enemies, to the poor, the widow, the orphan
Some of us need to choose the sacrifice of hospitality (Brenda near us)

4.) Worship

It's perhaps easier/preferable for you to stand and observe as we pray/sing
But when was the last time you gave a sacrifice of praise?
When was the last time you ignored insecurity or what others would think
And truly lifted your voice or raised your hands in adoration of God?
I promise: It will DO SOMETHING in your spirit if you worship sacrificially

5.) Service

In particular, service to the marginalized—to the poor, the elderly, the sick
I'm talking about serving in ways that doesn't always feel rewarding
Serving in ways that helps you listen & relate to the life of another
Joining them in their vulnerability or their suffering

6.) Inconvenience

There may be times when we can deliberately inconvenience ourselves
For the benefit of others

And while it would be preferable to have things work smoothly for us
What if—as a spiritual discipline—we embraced inconvenience
A friend pointed out that Jesus' birth in a manger
Foreshadowed the life of discomfort & inconvenience Jesus would live

I'm talking about having the long conversation when you want the short one
Waiting patiently when you want to rudely assert your desires
In parenting, letting your kid try instead of doing it yourself
I'm talking about choosing—in the smallest and most mundane of ways—
To embrace inconvenience as a spiritual sacrifice in the name of Christ

What would it look like if all of us—all the people called Asbury
Deliberately, habitually and joyfully
Began fasting, giving generously, practicing hospitality
Worshipping, serving and choosing inconvenience for the sake of others?

What might happen in our own spiritual lives? What might happen in this church?
What might happen in the city of Tulsa and around the world?

We should do for others what our Lord Jesus has done for us
He emptied himself that we might be filled
He was wounded that we might be healed
He was broken that we might be made whole
He died that we might find true life

If you've never given your life...
Let's pray.