

Rappahannock Christian Church – 6/5/11

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Communion Meditation

I've been teaching a baptismal class for the last 3 weeks. As I tell my students, there are some things we do in the church that do not seem to have the same significance that they had for the Christians in the Early Church. There was a time, for example, when stepping forward and saying, "Yes, I want to be baptized in the name of Christ, I want to become a Christian," was to invite persecution, even martyrdom.

This may also be true about what we are doing here at the Lord's Table. There are places TODAY where Christians are not free to come to this Table as we do. We do well, I believe, to remember this as we receive the Bread and the Cup. It is not something we are doing alone, privately. When we come to the Table we are publicly declaring that we are Christians and our intention is to continue to follow and obey Christ, who is our Lord.

Let me take you right back to those very first words that Jesus said at this Table as recorded in Matthew.

Matthew 26:26-29 – While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

How Strange Are You?

1 Peter 4:12-19 – Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?¹⁸ 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.

This is a bit of a strange Scripture, because Peter is telling us that we are happy and blessed if we suffer. We should be glad to participate in the suffering of Christ.

I find myself asking, "What does Peter mean?" Is he saying that suffering is a good thing? Is it something we should welcome? Does it have some sort of spiritual benefit? If so, does he mean that we are to *seek* suffering? The more the better?

Have you ever seen the movie *The DaVinci Code*? In the movie there's this weird albino monk who wears a barbed clamp on his leg so that he's always in pain. He wants to be suffering all the time.

This is not just in the movies. In the old days the monks used to beat themselves; "self flagellation," it is called. It was thought to be a pious thing to do. Some people isolate themselves in monasteries or walled camps away from society. They take vows of silence or poverty. Is Peter saying that this is what Christians should be doing, that this is what the obedient Christian life entails?

Let me remind you that Peter's words about being glad to suffer are not obscure. There are other statements of this kind in the New Testament as well. Paul, in Romans 8, says:
"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

And in Galatians 6 he says:

"I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."

I don't know exactly what he means by this, but it sounds like the result of some sort of suffering, doesn't it?

In 2 Corinthians 12 he says:

"...For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

James says almost the very same thing. In the first sentence of the body of his letter he says:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

See what I mean? This idea -- I think we could even call it an *expectation* -- of suffering is found all over the writings of the New Testament. We are told not to groan and complain, but to rejoice that we have been considered worthy to participate in the sufferings of Christ.

It seems to me that, with regard to suffering, people tend to go toward extremes, polar opposites. Some people seem to go out of their way to bring hardship upon themselves. They self-impose hardships because they believe that there is spiritual benefit in doing so -- hardships like privation, isolation, pain, the forsaking of earthly comforts.

Similarly, sometimes folks bring hardship on themselves by the way they interact with others. By their actions they *earn* the hatred, anger and even avoidance of other people. Perhaps in their zeal to convert others to their own beliefs they become loud, obnoxious and even violent. Go back and look at the history of the Church, and you will see that Christians have often made enemies of people by the tactless and arrogant way they behave and speak.

At the other extreme are folks who will do anything humanly possible to avoid suffering for Christ. “Hide that faith” is their motto! Don’t let anyone know that faith has an important place in my life. Someone might think me odd. It could be embarrassing!

Neither of these extremes represents what Peter is calling his fellow Christians to do!

What he is saying is simply this: Christians should live lives of honesty and purity. They should be devoted to the Way of Christ. They should actively promote the Good News about Jesus by what they say and do. They should support their fellow Christians.

If people think us strange for devoting ourselves to this Way... then, so be it.
If, when we call people to repentance, people get angry with us... then, so be it.

Maybe we *are* strange. After all, it is Peter himself who says that we live in this world as "aliens and strangers" because, now that we are saved by Christ and belong to him, our true citizenship is in heaven. The physical, temporal world doesn't have the same importance to us that it does for others. Because of our spiritual life in Christ, the physical and worldly things pale into shadow. We long to be released from the confines and limitations of earthly life. We want to move out of the dimness of this world into God's glorious light. I'd say this makes us different! If there is no difference between ourselves and non-believers, then what are we doing here in church? What are we playing at? What do we think we are accomplishing by our participation in the life and mission of the Church?

So, yes, we *are* different. Sometimes people will not like what we stand for, what we say and what we do. So, Peter says, “Do not be surprised when living a Christian life brings you hardships.”

This reminds me of an old saying. It goes like this:

“If you were to be arrested this afternoon and put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

I hope that there would be plenty of evidence for each of us.

Benediction

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. – Psalm 19:14