

***We Belong to Each Other***  
***I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11***  
***May 24, 2020***

This weekend our nation marks Memorial Day to honor the men and women who died while serving in the U.S. military. Memorial Day arose in response to the unprecedented carnage of the Civil War, in which a total of 620,000 soldiers died between both sides. Our nation pauses to remember and honor those who sacrificed their lives while serving our country. In addition to these victims of war, there are untold others who were impacted by their deaths – family members, comrades. And, of course, conflict has more than one side, so there are victims and bereaved in other lands.

Along with those who died while serving, there are veterans who returned home, but who suffer negative impacts from their tours of duty. They live with injuries and post-traumatic stress, conditions which cause an average of 22 veterans to die by suicide each day. Memorial Day is a humbling reminder of the suffering experienced by so many. It prompts us to long for healthier ways of dealing with conflict and of living with respect for one another. The cost of warfare and violence in whatever form is too great.

Suffering is a major theme of the first letter of Peter. In this brief letter the word “suffering” is mentioned twelve times. It was written to encourage Christians in the late first century as they were navigating life in a hostile pagan culture. Their lives were in danger because they proclaimed Jesus as Lord instead of the Roman Emperor. As the early Christians preached good news to the poor, freedom to the prisoner, and liberation for the oppressed, they refused to conform to the power structures of their day. The gospel message was threatening and they often paid the price with their lives.

Suffering is a major theme of our time. COVID-19 has claimed the lives of over 300,000 people around the world, including 90,000 in the United States. There are over 4.5 million cases around the world, 1.5 million in the U.S. We are a people in mourning, grieving the loss of precious human lives. But even our traditional ways of mourning have been curtailed. The damage of the virus is multiplied as employment, education, food, housing, health care, and even congregational life are impacted, for some more than others.

COVID-19 has revealed the deep roots of systemic injustice. People of color are contracting and dying of COVID-10 at disproportionate rates. They are less likely to have access to affordable and equitable healthcare. They are more likely to be low wage and essential workers. And they are experiencing increased threats of physical violence.

Recently, following the arrests of two men for the death of Ahmaud Arbery, an executive in Dallas wrote a piece for The Washington Post. He shared what he thinks about when he goes for a run in his neighborhood. *Does my cap, worn backward, send the wrong message? Do I open up my stride now or wait until I get out of the neighborhood and into the open roads so I don't appear to be running away from something or someone? How many times have I looked over my shoulder on this block? Does that look suspicious?* He writes, “You’ll always catch me across the street waving frantically and smiling. Not because I’m so sociable — just because I don’t want you to shoot.”<sup>i</sup>

The suffering, the fear, the danger is overwhelming. I acknowledge that I am not suffering in this season; I am merely inconvenienced. But my heart is breaking for the layers of

suffering experienced by my fellow human beings. How do we move through this experience with hope and in solidarity?

The letter of Peter encourages humility. To the Romans Paul wrote, “Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.” It is tempting to think that we are invincible and that the virus can never attack us. It is tempting to think that we’re smart enough not to depend on the direction of scientists and public health officials. But in the words of this ancient text, COVID-19 is like a “roaring lion prowling around, looking for someone to devour.” It is a force to be respected for its ability to quickly undermine personal and communal health. A dose of humility can help us withstand the many forces at play around us.

The letter says, “Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.” Hold fast to God’s presence. Invite God to walk this journey with you. As I lay awake at night worrying, I eventually try to remember to turn those worries into prayers. God is faithful in showing up, in being present, in caring for us through the storm. It is we who need to discipline ourselves to stay grounded in our faith, turning to scripture, singing the songs of faith, connecting with spiritual friends. When we are intentional about being alert, we see the golden thread of God’s presence woven through this bleak landscape.

Finally, recognize that our “brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.” Indeed, for those in underserved communities and undeveloped nations, the suffering is far more intense. We are bound together in this crisis, which enables us to look at those who differ from us with empathy, even with tenderness, for their loss is our loss, our sorrow is their sorrow. This global crisis has the potential, if wisely fostered, to break down barriers which divide us. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Father Greg Boyle tells about Rene, who is “having a bad day. He’s at the bus stop, eating a peach and stuck in a funk he can’t shake. It’s a common experience for homies when...they ‘realize how thrown away they are.’ Things get dark. Today the darkness is weighing more heavily on Rene than his usual list of burdens and woes. It is nearly paralyzing.

“Every day, before he heads to work at Homeboy, he can be found at this bus bench. An elderly Japanese woman is also there every day. He doesn’t know where she goes; maybe a senior center.... Everyone always makes sure she gets a seat on the bench. The bus arrives, and six or so folks around Rene begin to line up to board. Rene makes sure the Japanese woman is ahead of him. As they make their way onto the bus, the old lady turns and says to Rene, ‘I admire you.’ This is the first time they’ve every spoken.

“‘You do?’ Rene asks. ‘Why?’

“‘You eat healthy,’ she says matter-of-factly. ‘Every morning you’re here eating fruit. A banana. An apple. Today, a peach. You eat fruit. So I admire you.’ Rene helps her climb on the bus. She sits up front in the senior section. He sits in the back. He sits there and replays in his mind what the woman has said to him, and he realizes that the funk is gone.

“He can’t help himself. He works his way through the morning crush of commuting bodies and finds the Japanese woman. He gets on one knee and looks her in the eye. ‘Thank you for bringing so much spirit into my day.’ The woman smiles, she touches Rene’s arm, and he returns to the back of the bus. Every moment, it turns out, is an invitation to recognize our interconnectedness.”<sup>ii</sup>

A dose of humility, trust in God, and compassion for those who suffer are practices of faith for the living of these days. They guide us to find and to be light in the midst of the darkness of these days. They remind us that we belong to each other and to God.

---

<sup>i</sup>Benyam Tesfai, "I don't smile when I run to be sociable. I smile so I don't get shot," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup>Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), pp. 179-180.

Rev. Lori Sawdon  
First United Methodist Church, Santa Rosa, CA