Easter 7

May 24, 2020

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

When I was 8 or 9 years old, a neighbor invited me along when he took his children fishing. I’d never been, so I was excited about going.

After we arrived at the lake, he set us up with fishing rods. He told me that if I cast my line and waited quietly, I’d have a better chance of catching a fish. But I far preferred the act of casting my line and reeling it in to the waiting quietly part.

I think that, on some level, I understood that when you cast your line, the whole point is that you hope that your hook doesn’t look the same when you reel it in as it did when you cast it out. But I found far too much joy in the act of trying to see how far I could get my hook to go, without the rod flying out of my hands, to care about anything else.

It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that I didn’t catch anything. Or that I was never invited again.

I’d forgotten about that day until I read our Epistle reading for today, which includes the instruction to “cast all your anxiety upon God, because God cares for you,” as part of the guide for how to endure suffering.

Suffering is a primary focus of 1st Peter. We’re reminded in the portion we hear today that suffering is not unique to any of us, but that our “brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.” We certainly can see that today.

Still, “the universality of suffering should not be mistaken for the necessity of it.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Not all suffering is necessary, and not all suffering allows for the kind of transformation that St. Paul meant when he wrote, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

We tend to think that suffering is something to be avoided. But Jesus’ own life demonstrates that seeking to conform our will to that of God will not be without difficulty, will not be without suffering or sorrow, or without those who would have us avoid all the unpleasant parts, but instead just go along and not ruffle feathers.

Likewise, we suppose that suffering and sorrow are something to hide or be ashamed of, something to not burden others with. That to be “normal” is to be happy and to be free from worry.

Again, we see from Jesus’ own life that we need to be comfortable with sorrow and lament, to have people who accompany you through it. Sorrow and lament are not things to be ashamed of. They are an honest response to the pain in the world around us. They honor the lives of those who have died. They invite us to place our hope in the God who promises that death is not the final answer. Who promises that we are never alone. Who comes to us in the cracks of our brokenness and makes us whole again – not on our schedule, but in God’s own good time.

Mourning and lament are acts of faithful worship**.**[[3]](#footnote-3) Worship is not only about praise and thanksgiving. What could be a more faithful act than to cast our anxieties upon God, and to trust that God cares for us? To bait our hook with our anxieties and cast them as far away from us as possible, trusting that when we reel in our line, those anxieties will no longer be there, but will have been replaced with the peace and hope that can only come from God.

We are mourning the loss of our “normal.” When the day comes that we return to worship here in person, not all of us will be here. We will fast from Holy Communion, that tangible morsel of God’s bountiful grace, and we will fast from lifting up our voices in song, from gathering for fellowship and sharing meals with each other.

The reason for our fasting, for our suffering, for our loss, should never be forgotten. We fast from these things, we stay in our homes, we wear masks and keep physical distance from each other to honor the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. We do these things to prevent needless suffering. And when we do these things, we grow in our ability to see others the way God sees them – beloved children of the One who created all that is, seen and unseen.

**But even though we fast from these things, we have not stopped being the church. We have not stopped worshiping. And we have not stopped being the body of Christ on earth.**

And good has come from this. We have people joining us for worship who live far enough away to not be able to join us in person. People who may never set foot in this building have become a part of our community. And we’re in the process of making our livestream setup a permanent thing, not just for the next few months, but beyond.

Suffering and sorrow have the power to transform us. Perhaps part of the transformation from all this suffering will be to experience new ways to worship, new understandings of community. Learning that there are many ways to receive God’s bountiful grace. Having the courage to not just dream about a better tomorrow, but to insist upon it.

Our journey through the season of Easter concludes next Sunday, with the festival of Pentecost. But each Sunday, we celebrate the resurrection, and we are reminded of just how far God will go to ensure that we can receive mercy and grace. God transformed the cross from an instrument of suffering and oppression and death, into a sign of hope and love and salvation.

Our faith invites us to reframe our understanding of suffering and sorrow, to look for where God can be found in the midst of it, and to imagine a world transformed by God’s mercy and grace. And God invites us to cast away our anxieties, remembering that – unless we’re playing with a boomerang or fishing like I did as a child – we don’t cast something away and plan to pick it back up.

May we find the courage to truly cast away our anxieties, so that, like the Psalmist, we can confidently declare, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Jennifer Kaalund, commentary on 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11. *Working Preacher*, May 24, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Romans 5:3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sermon on Joel 1:2-10, the Rev. Raphael Warnock, delivered May 22, 2020 via Festival of Homiletics [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Psalm 46:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)