

May 17, 2020

God's Right Hand

Shepherd's Grace Church

13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.(1 Peter 3: 13-22)

15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

There were flash flood warnings in place in Augusta this weekend. The rain we received was torrential! According to news reports there was more than five and one half inches that fell in a little over three hours! Reports were that El Dorado Lake rose 6 inches overnight. Rochelle tells me that is the equivalent of one Olympic size swilling pool being emptied into the lake every minute for more than 7 hours.

I did not check her math, but I tend to believe her figures are accurate. That is a lot of water! As I lay awake listening to the lightening, the thunder and the hail on Thursday, my mind turned back to my very first boy scout camp out.

I was a tenderfoot and back in those days, hazing was a common practice. It was not a serious thing, but there were snipe hunts and clean-up duties and a few other things, but my thoughts on this rainy night turned to sleeping arrangements. You see, the tenderfoot scouts had to sleep farthest from the fire and were told in no uncertain terms where they would pitch their tents.

As luck would have it, the place farthest from the fire in our campsite on that particular evening was the place closest to the creek. After evening campfire, the older scouts stoked the fire and the scout leadership stayed up with the adults to plan events for the next day. As they headed for bed, lightening was just starting to flash far off in the distance.

Even when I was younger, I was never good at falling asleep in the quiet. At home, I would fall asleep listening to the radio (In the spring and well into late summer the radio was tuned to the St. Louis Cardinals baseball games with Harry Kerry and Jack Buck) so when the camp got quiet, I was thankful for the breeze as it picked up a little and whispered through the trees. I was even more thankful a short time later as the gentle patter of rain began to fall on our tent.

I drifted off to sleep and slept deeply until about 2 A.M.. At that time, I was awakened abruptly by water running through our tent and under my sleeping bag. The bag was soaking wet as was I! My tentmate was as yet, unaffected but that wouldn't last long. The rest of camp seemed quiet but the gentle rain that had put me to sleep was now a downpour and the creek which had been about 20 feet away was now just outside our tent flap!

Quickly, I woke my tentmate and gathered my things. Shoving them into my pack, I pulled on the clothes I had, realizing that everything I owned was soaking wet. My tentmate did the same thing and we grabbed our packs and headed up to the fire!

Thankfully, the fire was still smoldering and we threw some kindling on it and blew with all our might to create a blaze. All the wood, including the small kindling we were using was wet and our efforts produced a lot of smoke which we were inhaling with every breath we took.

Soaking wet , kneeling down in the mud around the fire, in the pouring rain inhaling smoke and watching the creek rise, we were quite a sight! After a

few minutes, we were able to get the fire going and we threw some bigger pieces of wood onto the fire. They smoked and sizzled for awhile but eventually caught fire and started to burn.

When the two of us had the fire going sufficiently, my tentmate went to the leader's tent and woke our scoutmaster. The rain and the water had not bothered him yet and he was sleeping soundly. Needless to say, he was not a happy camper at having been woken at 3 A.M.

Stumbling to get dressed, he realized how hard it was raining and recognized the danger we were in. At once, he woke the entire camp and had us all assemble at his tent. As many as could, crowded into his tent to stay dry but the tenderfoot scouts were still standing out in the rain. At that point, it didn't matter to me anymore. I was already soaking wet as was everything I had brought with me. A little more suffering in the rain simply did not matter.

In this morning's passage, Peter asks, "Who would want to harm you if you are diligently trying to do what is right?" Sometimes, it is not a who but a what. Sometimes, in all our efforts to live our lives doing the right thing and helping others, there are things that occur that are beyond our control. These things, these events pull at the very fabric of who we are and while we still try to do that which is right we ask, "Why?"

As we continue to do the things we have been taught, as we continue to try to do those things we believe are right, the event occurring all around us grows to the point where it is so cataclysmic that we are tempted to give up.

If you were to go flip on your television set this morning from the comfort of your home and turn to a news or information station, I have no doubt that you would discover the latest update on the event that is infecting our lives at this very moment. You would hear the numbers and perhaps see the devastation painted either in words or in graphic detail in picture.

The event we are facing is real and the details do point to the reality. We can think that it will not affect us as individuals, and hopefully it has not affected any of us directly as we listen this morning, yet we cannot deny that it is affecting our world and the people around us. Some of these people are family. Some are friends. All are neighbors! All are neighbors.

Even though we persevere, even though we continue to do what is right, we are affected. We are affected because those around us are our neighbors. In John 14 this morning, we are told, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." In the face of persecution by this invisible enemy, we are challenged to remember the commandment.

It was given just one chapter earlier but already, we struggle to remember it. As Jesus is sharing the last meal he will eat with his disciples, he says to them, I leave you a new commandment, "That you love one another. Even as I have loved you, you should love one another!" (John 13)

Today, we feel put upon. We feel as if the weight of this entire pandemic is challenging our way of life. Our liberties are being limited and we are being asked to make sacrifices. We are being asked to give up things and live lives in different ways. We are having church virtually instead of together. We are celebrating graduations on the phone instead of in person. Life has changed, the world has changed and we are suffering!

Joel Hamby tells a story of an American Hero, Sir Eugene Bullard. Bullard was an expatriated American living in France at the onset of World War I. He joined the French army before the United States entered the war. He was severely wounded and awarded a medal for bravery.

When the United States entered the war, Bullard entered with them as part of a new unit of aviators. Bullard became a very skilled flyer and yet, when his unit was called up to the fight, he was the only one not called with them. You see, Bullard was a black man and they were not letting blacks fly as officers in the army of the United States in WWI.

Bullard was discharged and joined a French fighting unit as a pilot and again distinguished himself. After the war, he opened a restaurant and jazz club in Paris and when WWII came along, he signed up to fight again. Because he was an expatriated American, he was assigned to fight with a unit that eventually fought with the United States Army. Once again Bullard distinguished himself and was recognized by the French for his outstanding service and bravery.

At the end of the war, because of his extraordinary record, Bullard was knighted by the French. As he was getting on in years, he decided to return to the United States, the country of his birth. Here, he sought opportunities in the restaurant and club industry but was unsuccessful in finding anything. Eventually, he took a job as an elevator operator in New York City.

In 1959, President Charles De Gaulle visited the United States. Before visiting any dignitaries or having a planned audience with the president, De Gaulle insisted on seeing Sir Bullard. He sought out the elevator operator, thanked him for his years of service and spent an evening listening to his stories. Today, Bullard is largely unknown as an American hero but he never quit fighting for the cause of freedom that he knew to be his birthright.

His liberties were denied as an individual, but he knew that his fight was bigger than the fight for personal freedoms. The fight was for a way of life...a way that invited liberty and justice for all!

Today, we are engaged in that same kind of fight. I rarely use the word fight because I do believe that in most instances, fight is something to be avoided. Today, however, I believe that fight is the right word! We are engaged in a fight. It is a fight against that which we cannot see and as we have engaged it now for the past few months, some of us are tired.

We want things to go back to the way they were and we want our sacrifice to be over. We want to believe that we have suffered enough. Still, the words of Jesus ring in our ears. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." As we remember these words, we remember that liberties and freedoms are not given by nations or governments. They are, as our "Declaration of Independence" declares, "endowed by our creator."

We happen to live in a nation where the liberties and freedoms we treasure are protected by our government and by our willingness to claim them but what we must also remember is that these rights and freedoms are endowed to all people. They are not our rights as individuals but they are our rights as people created in the image and likeness of God. We are called to respect them for others just as we respect and expect them for ourselves.

When we suffer for doing what is right, it is not a suffering we enter into with joy. We know that in our suffering, we are going to endure pain but when we remember that we are called to "Love one another" we can enter into that pain willingly and without fear.

We do have to give up things for a time, but we give them up knowing that we will gain them back in perseverance. Jesus said, "I have the power to lay down my life, I have the power to take it back up again!" Our suffering...our struggle is for now, but we can trust that it is not forever.

I know there are some in our congregation who are listening to me this morning and have been laid off or had hours reduced and you are hurting. In this moment, I want to speak directly to you. I have talked to you on the phone or sent an e-mail or text or Facebook post to you. You are in our thoughts and prayers, but more than that, you are in our plans to seek and receive recovery from the struggle we are all engaged in. You are not in this alone. We do all stand together even though we stand apart in distance!

We pledge...we must pledge together to see this struggle through as did Sir Bullard. Our goal must be the defeat of this pandemic and it must be a

common goal. While we are committed to the fight, all of us must suffer a little so that some...those perhaps least equipped will not have to suffer a lot.

A friend of mine said earlier this week that the economic devastation of our sacrifice will perhaps take years to fully recover. It will take longer if we do not do it together.

I was reading an article in "Dissenter's Magazine" comparing the struggles we now face and the struggles at the end of WWII. At the end of the second world war, much of our nation's business had been nationalized. The control had been taken out of the hands of individuals and private corporations in order to support the war effort.

There were some in our country who believed the nation's best interests might be served for these businesses to remain under government control. Others, however, remembered who we were and made the more compelling argument that we are a nation that succeeds because we allow the freedom of people to innovate and create rather than to be controlled. By the end of the 1950's this second group prevailed and almost all business that had been nationalized was returned to private capital ownership.

The point here is to recognize that we are a nation, strongly entrenched in individual liberty but also mindful that that liberty will be used for the good of all. We may be suffering today but we are not afraid of that suffering. WE should not be afraid of having to make sacrifice so that the suffering endured is a struggle embraced by all! As Peter said, we do not fear as others do and we are not intimidated!

Those of us who gather today...those who gather virtually this morning do not gather in fear. We gather in faith! We are not intimidated by a temporary circumstance. We are instead encouraged and energized that in this temporary circumstance we can stand together...separated by distance but not by faith!

We know that there is something more than pandemic virus and we know that we will ultimately not be defeated or even swayed by this global event. This morning we are invited by Peter to know that our hope is in the Lord! "We hold Christ sanctified as Lord! That is to say that we set Him apart from all else and recognize Him alone as the giver of our freedoms.

Because of that we can have a defense prepared for those who see us differently. We can help others understand that the sacrifices we make today we make willingly in order that we might obey the Word given to us by our

Lord and our savior. We sacrifice because we love our neighbor as we are commanded to do!

The defense we prepare is a defense of the Love God has given us by sending a Son, "His only Son that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3) As we recognize the example Christ set for us, we can do no less than recognize God's incredible gift. We deserved death, yet in Christ we have been given life. We deserve to be alienated and abandoned but in Christ we stand together! Our defense of the hope we have is the defense of life, a life of abundance, restored to us not by our own actions but by the selfless actions of one who came to set an example for us; that we Love one another. In light of His actions, how can we do less!

This morning we are called to take up this hope! We are not called to use it as a bullying technique, but to be gentle and kind to one another. Our hope is to guide us and remind us that we are not all in the same place. Some are suffering more as they think of losing liberties they have for so long been accustomed to.

As we present them with an alternative, we are to present it not with our words, but with our actions. We are to live lives of quiet sacrifice, continuing to stay at home as long as those who know more than we do ask us to. We are to live lives of quiet sacrifice wearing masks or gloves or washing hands until we can be certain that we are not a threat to others. Our hope in setting this example is that others see us cheerfully doing the things others who know more than we do have asked us to do until we do not need to do them any longer.

The day will come, and I believe it will come soon when we no longer have to distance ourselves but until that day comes, we can, we must struggle against this enemy and fight the fight with reverence, the kind of fear that comes from trusting and knowing God!

We do not fear as others fear. Instead, we fear that by not obeying God's command that we love one another we will be betraying the sacrifice Christ made for us. In that sacrifice, he gave up his life for Hope! He gave his life so we might once again stand blameless before the Lord! He gave up his life so we might have life again! That is our hope but more than that, it is the hope of the Lord who by His grace and mercy shows us new life.

Peter reminds us that there are those who willingly disobey the Lord's command. God watched them patiently at the time of Noah. We only get a brief account of the sin they were committing in Genesis chapter 6. To gain a more complete understanding, we must read an apocryphal text from the

Jewish Bible. In the book of 1 Enoch, the Lord outlines the sin of the people in chapter 6. Here, the Nephilim commit great sins against God's commands and despite God's warnings and their knowledge of the sin they continue to commit them.

As a result, their fate is sealed. God waits for the building of the ark and saves a few...that is to say God saves 8 to start again. The rest are washed away in a flood of water. Peter reminds us that this flood is a precursor to our Baptism. It is not intended to cleanse our physical being but to remind us that in spite of all we have done, we have been renewed by Grace!

I add a brief note here that after the flood, God regrets God's action and vows never to destroy the earth by flood again. I believe we can imagine the influence of this decision on God's ultimate plan for our salvation through Grace by the work of Christ on the cross!

Baptism, Peter reminds us does not offer a cleansing of our bodies, but instead invites us to appeal to God through the saving Grace of Jesus because of his death for our sin and because of His resurrection to new life.

In baptism, I invite you to remember that you have died to your old self and by God's amazing grace, you have been raised up to new life. This is our hope and it is in God alone!

This hope is what allows us to endure suffering for a short time, knowing that we do not live in time at all but we live in eternity. In eternity, we recognize that God has already won the battle, battle we face this morning and the battle we face as we continue to struggle with His commands.

In our effort to love our neighbor, we remember that those older scouts did not truly wish to harm us, only to haze us a little and invite us to know the struggles they had to endure. When the rains came, they were the first to pitch in and help. They were the first to recognize that there was some work to be done and they got in and did it. Why? Because they watched their leaders!

The leaders stepped out into the rain and darkness and helped break down camp. They stoked the fire so those of us who were wet could get dry and they disregarded their own comfort to make others more comfortable.

Today, as we remember our baptism, we remember that Jesus died once for all. He who knew no sin bore the sin of the world so we could live. Sometimes we are asked to live as an example of his incredible love! Gladly, we disregard our own comfort for the comfort of others! We do it not to gain God's favor but because before we believed, God did it for us. Today we

follow our leader who now sits at the right hand of the Father and to whom all authority has been give.

We watch as he uses that authority to remind us that we are to love one another! Amen!