

Making the Rock Our Thing

^{NRS} 1Pe 2:19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Back in Austin, I had the chance to hear Father Thomas Keating at an inter-religious gathering. Keating is a former monk and now teaches contemplative meditation out of Snowmass, Colorado. Very well known in some church circles, I curious what he would be like in person. I walked away incredibly impressed with his authenticity and his kindness. He was one of those people you come across very rarely- one of those people who simply radiate grace and love. But, according to him he didn't start out this way. Indeed, for most of his life he said he was one of the most austere, rule bound, curmudgeons of a monk, you would ever *not* want to sit down to dinner with. In his book Invitation to Love he describes how, bit by bit, he began to break out of this and how one person in particular, a young man named Bernie, helped.

Being a very serious and responsible kind of guy, Keating had risen quickly in the monastic world becoming an abbot at a fairly young age. As Abbot he was the guy who made sure everything ran smoothly and according to order- and being Trappists, basically the marines of the monk world, order was very important. But the day that Bernie entered the monastery, Keating said everyone knew that whatever was going to happen it wasn't going to be order.

At the time Bernie joined all the monks had taken a vow of silence, and they communicated mainly through the use of about 200 hand signals- only on very special days could they speak with one another- and then only in whispers. Keating says he knew he was in trouble when Bernie, who simply LOVED people and enjoyed being with people learned every single hand gesture in one day. All 200.

And the worst was that his favorite was the signal for 'thank you'. The signal for 'thank you' is made by holding together the pointer and middle fingers, and touching them to your lips. Keating recalled in horror that Bernie did this every chance he got, going through doors twice at times just to give the signal. And he didn't just give the signal, either. Instead of just silently touching his fingers to his lips, Bernie would kiss his fingers and make this enormous, vulgar, smacking sound- and then he would throw his hand out at you like he was throwing a fast ball. Keating remembers that he finally got so fed up with Bernie's un-monk-like passion for life, that he would go out of his way to avoid him when he saw him coming down the hall- and yet he was attracted to this love all the same.

To Keating's chagrin Bernie's presence began to change life at the monastery. Before Bernie, holidays were not a big deal. The highlight was that the monks were allowed to whisper to each other on these days and if it was available, they might even have a tiny little bowl of ice cream. Whoa. Watch out! ☺ Well, ol' Bernie decided that if the monks were going to indulge in a little bit of innocent pleasure, why then they might as well enjoy it. So with some laughter and merriment, Bernie would pick up a big bowl and fill it with not just one but maybe 6 scoops of ice cream, smother on hot fudge, dump pecans and cherries and whip cream on the top, and then, just to tease them, he

would go and sit in front of the crankiest monks, like Keating, just to show them that lightning wasn't going to strike- and maybe with the hope that they might even join in a little and enjoy themselves, if only a tiny bit.

Keating was not amused, and you might guess they were headed for a collision. It came when Bernie was moved up in rank and given some responsibility at a time when Keating had left the monastery on retreat. In perfect consistency with his personality, Bernie had made friends with several of the families who lived nearby the monastery, and in Keating's absence, he had decided with their help to spruce the place up a bit, you know- a few curtains, a little paint. Well, Bernie was just absolutely thrilled with himself saying that God created the world beautiful and died to put an end to suffering- not to prolong it. Keating, of course, saw things quite differently- when he returned all he could see was the world creeping in, and when Bernie was out for a walk one day, without even saying a word to him, Keating had everything ripped down without so much as an explanation and certainly without apology. Looking back with sadness at his own deadness and hardness of heart, Keating recalls that Bernie didn't say a word against him, and that his passion and love, even for Keating, didn't even seem to ebb. Keating himself knew that had to have hurt, though- and he now considers that one of his worst moments.

Are we called to suffer? Are we called to be suspicious about life and enjoying it? Is suffering, denying ourselves, is this what faith is about- at least a little bit? Keating certainly thought so. And he has an enormous amount of tradition behind him- from the earliest Christians who were made to suffer and were put to death for their beliefs, to the early monks who believed by denying themselves they were making themselves worthy

of eternity, to everyday believers who continue to put themselves at risk in order to order to care for the least of God's children. There's a long tradition in the Christian church of faith going hand in hand with suffering.

And in the text from First Peter this morning, it certainly sounds like this is the case. We hear: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.* First Peter even goes so far as to define this as grace. The text opens like this: *For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.* The word translated as "credit" here is *charis*, or grace- probably the most important word in the New Testament.

Do you want grace? Then suffer. That seems to be what we're hearing.

Now, I know we don't like this. I certainly don't. Who would? We arrange our lives to *avoid* pain- not go hunting for it. But, even though we don't like this thought, that maybe faith does call us into suffering- I think there is a part of us, a part of us down deep, that is concerned it's true. It's the part of us that's uncomfortable when we see a person in need, in real need, and we think about all of the things we could be doing, maybe should be doing, with our time and our resources to be helpful. It's the part of us that feels embarrassed when we buy something we know is a little silly and consider what else we might have done with the money.

A couple of years ago I bought a big ol' gas grill spending more than I planned to, and I remember kind of over explaining to my father-in-law that it was partly an anniversary gift and birthday gift to Melissa. Without blinking an eye he said, "It sounds to me like you bought it just because it was Tuesday," meaning I didn't buy this because

of anything special- I just felt like it. He wasn't trying to be mean at all. And really he was right- all that stuff about our anniversary and Melis' birthday. I bought it because there was a sale and we wanted it. But I felt a little uncomfortable, a little wasteful, maybe.

I think there's a part of us that's worried faith really does call us to suffer- and we wonder, quietly, if we're doing enough. We wonder how much is enough, anyway? I mean it's probably more than we're doing now, but do you have to go and be Mother Theresa or an Oscar Schindler?

But you know what? I think we're wrong. I think we're wrong. While faith certainly isn't a kind of lucky rabbit's foot offering us a ticket to health, wealth, and prosperity- I don't believe our faith calls us to suffer, either. And it's not because I disagree with the Bible- but because of it. Let's take a closer look at First Peter.

In this text the most important word in the passage isn't some deep Greek word with meanings hard to render into English- it's a simple word. It's the demonstrative pronoun 'this' in the sentence "*For to **this** you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*" Well, what exactly does the word 'this' refer to? There are two possibilities:

Yes, the word 'this' could mean suffering. For to this, to suffering, you have been called. Christ suffered and so should you. I think you can read it like this, but I think this is the lazy way to read this text- and most folks in the church have settled for this.

But given the rest of the passage, I think 'this' doesn't refer to suffering at all, but refers to something completely different. In this text "this" doesn't mean suffering, but to following in Jesus' footsteps *in the face of suffering*. "*To this you are called*"- not "To suffering" but "To Christ's example". First Peter isn't calling us to suffer- First Peter is calling us to act in a certain way *when* we suffer. And this is a very different thing.

What First Peter is saying is that faith isn't about being worried or guilty about enjoying life too much like Father Keating- just the opposite. Faith is about being so engaged in life, so committed to living, that even when we suffer- even then we might know moments in which we are so transfixed by our awareness of God, as First Peter says, that we're able to hold our heads up and keep on going and not be dragged down by it all.

Just look at the rest of the passage. At the very beginning faith isn't about seeking out pain. Faith is about enduring- the word here is *hupophero*, literally meaning bearing up under a heavy load, it's like we're weighed down but we keep on moving anyway. Faith isn't about looking for suffering- it's about bearing up under it when it comes.

And then examples of Jesus- they aren't examples about him seeking out suffering and saying what a great guy he was because he could have been enjoying love, but actually he was making himself miserable every chance he got. No, all of the examples are about how he acted when others visited suffering upon him. "*When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten.*" Jesus didn't seek out abuse- but the point here is that when he was abused, he didn't get caught up in the game. And you know what I'm talking about. You know how the game is played.

Someone gets on our nerves, and we put up with it, put up with it, put up with it, and we put up with it until we can't take it anymore, and then we lash out at them with all of this stored up hostility. And they're looking at us like, "Where did THAT come from?" And we know it was a little overboard- but we tell ourselves, "Hey, they had it coming! And hey, it's their fault anyway because they started it." Only, our excuses don't really help- because the end result is we've allowed ourselves to be sucked in and become the kind of people we aren't proud of just adding anger to anger.

And even more interestingly First Peter says when Jesus suffered he did not threaten. Literally it says when he was suffering he didn't warn or threaten. We do this, too. When people are getting on our nerves we like to tell them what's going to happen to them if they keep it up. In Melis' family they've said for a long time, "If you play with water, you're gonna' get wet." And in their case it isn't a threat- it's a promise. If you threaten Melis with a couple of drops of water, you will get a cup or a bucket back in your face. I'm just letting you know. But more seriously when we the world as filled with threats and people who want to take advantage, such that we're always going around making sure everyone knows we're the boss- First Peter says we've already lost.

I see this the most when we're driving. You know, you're going along, and you've left this nice gap between you and the person in front of you- just like you're supposed to. But you see that person in the other lane in front of you. And you're thinking, "Don't do it." And then with no warning, with no signal, they cut right in front of you. NO! We say. And so, we'll show them. You've seen this a million times. The solution is to just get right up behind the people we're following and leave no possibility anyone can do *that* to us again, and take *our* space away. We drive like we're a warning,

a threat. But now we're the ones following too close- we're the ones adding to tension on the road.

My friend Ryan who used to be pastor down at Woodburn had a fantastic saying I repeat A LOT when I drive. When someone would do this to him, he would simply slow down and leave a little more room and say, "You cannot take that which I freely give." "You cannot take that which I freely give." Other people may be driving crazy- there's nothing we can do about that, but instead of seeing them as taking something of his, Ryan saw himself as giving it away freely, suffering maybe- but certainly not threatening in return.

First Peter says faith isn't about going looking for suffering. Believe me, if we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, suffering will find us. We don't have to go looking for it. What faith is about is coping with suffering when it comes and not allowing it to transform us into angry and hateful people. Faith is about keeping our eyes fixed on what is beautiful and holy when everything around us seems to be conspiring to bring us down. Faith is saying I may not be able to control what happens to me- but I can control how I react to it. And whenever we wonder what's possible- we can look to the Christ, who even when the pastors and the soldiers beat him down, even when his own friends, his family, turned away- he kept choosing forgiveness and life and love. And when he lost it in the garden and asked for the cup to be taken away, even then he didn't rake himself over the coals for being human. He recovered and said, "But your will be done" and he kept going.

When I was in high school Albert Camus was one of my favorite writers. I remember writing a paper on The Stranger, and I was so intrigued I even nabbed a copy of The Myth of Sisyphus my brother had. Do you remember Sisyphus? He was the guy in Greek mythology condemned to forever roll a rock up a hill, only to have it crash back down again. And then Sisyphus would have to walk down to the bottom and push it back up again. Well, Camus says that life, especially when we are suffering- this is what it feels like. Any of you who are in pain right now- you know exactly what this is like. You're in pain, but then you start to feel better, and so you start getting out there, but then you over do it, and then your back down again pushing that rock, that pain up the hill again.

What I love about Camus is he tells us we shouldn't try to fool ourselves that we can escape suffering, like our friends who tell us if we just had the right faith, if we just believed the right things God will fix everything. And we certainly shouldn't pretend we like pushing this rock of suffering, or that God takes some kind of terrible pleasure in our suffering. No, he says, the only thing to do is when we have to push it, to do it, to bear up under it, and even, he says, "To make the rock our thing." And what he means by this is that even when we're suffering, maybe we don't have to fight it, but we can let it be, and not let it get in the way of celebrating the joys that still come.

Well, in spite of all the suffering Keating inflicted on himself and everyone around him, Bernie somehow was able to find ways to love the crusty old man. Even after Keating ripped down all of Bernie's decorations and broke his heart, Bernie didn't give up on him. Bernie kept at him, trying to find a way to show kindness to Keating- to

show Keating the kind of love and joy in life that Keating himself didn't feel he deserved or was even appropriate. From special food to special music Bernie tried it all- and in the end it was the music that got him. One had after hearing one his favorite pieces from Bernie, Keating meant to ask him if he could record it. But he forgot- and later that day Bernie while out walking fell over dead from a heart attack. Keating says grief hit him like a ton of bricks- grief for all of his meanness, all of his smallness.

And then, the strangest thing happened, a few days later after the funeral, one of the brothers asked Keating if he wanted to hear Bernie's voice again one last time holding a cassette tape up in the air. "Well of course, put it in", he said. The tape wasn't Bernie talking, but Bernie playing, playing the piano- playing the same piece of music Keating had so very much wanted a recording of. Smiling from ear to ear, absolutely sure that Bernie was looking down at him and laughing his fool head off at him Keating wrote this: "I never knew anyone who resembled sunshine more than this man. No one ever loved life so genuinely and consented to its goodness to unreservedly. The way Bernie is, must be the way God is." (p. 57)

Beloved, we are not called to suffer. We are called to love life and consent to it's goodness after the manner of Christ himself. And, when we suffer, we are called to remember this even more so. This week don't wait to tell or to show the people you care about that you love them. And no matter what's going on find something, anything, that makes you smile from ear to ear. **Amen.**