

“The Hour”

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 28, 2017

Acts 1:1-14

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

John 17:1-11

First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho

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This is Memorial Day Weekend in the United States of America and it's a very patriotic observance as we remember people who have died in military service. Our lives as we know it have been shaped by their sacrifice. We're reminded to not take life for granted.

Yet there is a lot going on in our world that we are complicit with, such as getting upset about terrorist bombings that kill children, while on the other hand perpetuating state-sanctioned bombings that kill civilians, including children. For those who notice this hypocrisy, it can be very frustrating, even painful to feel like there's not much that can be done by an individual to change things, to help our world snap out of this violent brutality. Even listening to the news can get wearing as we hear about hate crimes in Portland, and murder in Mississippi. Violence is all around.

In following Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the Bible is clear that he lived his life as a pacifist. For the first few hundred years, Christians would not participate in the military. When he was very young, Jesus' family migrated from Bethlehem to Egypt as political refugees fleeing an authoritarian who used violence, fear, and intimidation as a tool of control. The slaughter of the innocents, wars and rumors of wars, militarism, arms deals, civilians killed, spirals of hatred and violence continue and can be really troubling. Thankfully they're troubling. Hopefully. If it's not troubling, then there's a problem.

That's the point of this morning's scriptures. While John reminds us through Jesus' prayer of the unity given by God, the relational aspect of God's glory comes through as God gives Christ authority over all people of the world, and Christ gives eternal life to all that God gives. It's a circle of life and inclusion. In Acts as Jesus ascends to heaven the promise of the Holy Spirit is given and the disciples devote themselves constantly to prayer. As these scriptures interweave with 1 Peter 4 and 5, it's no wonder this passage starts with, "Beloved" as how the author addresses those who are reading this letter to the church. These are people identified by love. All three passages celebrate love, unity, prayer, spirit, devotion, and it puts the rest of life into perspective. They do not excuse or validate suffering or struggle, but they point to deeper truths, and as Peter says, "Beloved," we are tapping into some kind of identity and joy that cannot be taken away no matter what we face or what others may do.

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." He goes on to talk about feeling blessed when we suffer, not because the suffering is good, because it isn't; but because it shows something about our hearts.

One of the quotes I heard on the radio news this week confirmed my own thoughts about economic inequality, saying we live in a society where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. In addition, the alien and foreigner, refugees, immigrants, are becoming more and more excluded. Violence is becoming (if it isn't already) one of the most profitable industries in America. If you notice these things and find these trends

troubling, then it's a hopeful sign, that as Peter says, "you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you."

Here is Peter writing to oppressed people who wonder how life can be so harsh when God's purposes are beautiful beyond description. They are living in the midst of the world's disconnect between the Reality of Grace and the realities we create. It's ironic that the more people focus on non-violence, peace, love, compassion, meditation, quiet, surrender, truthfulness, and forbearance, the more they are persecuted and oppressed.

Peter is writing to these suffering Christians, teaching them how to make it through. But more than how to cope, he's also encouraging them how not to add to the problems. It's one thing to be frightened, or anxious, and it's another thing to let these emotions shape your responses. People reacting in fear don't always make the most rational, grounded choices. It's easy to get sucked into things like the myth of redemptive violence, or justice based on retribution rather than restoration and redemption.

Peter gives us three things to focus on, three charges to shape our living. They are all linked because one without the other would skew off into a tangent that would add to the problems. These three, united things are foundational to what Christians are called to, throughout the ages, to stay rooted in God's loving Presence.

Humility, Discipline, and Resistance. Let's look briefly at each of these, starting with a humility that reminds us of the finger pointing. Remember that as you point the finger, usually in accusation, there are three pointing back to you inviting self-reflection. Most people forget about the three fingers, and living at low levels of spiritual development, it can feel very threatening to self-critique. The things that sustain angry, violent reactions in life can be undone if you take seriously Jesus' command to pray for your enemies. In looking at our own lives and realizing we also have the capacity to do evil, but by God's grace, we turn from evil and turn to Christ Jesus; this invites our compassion toward those who know not what they do. Humility is a word that comes from the heart, and in your heart is the living presence of God. This living Presence is in all people. Humility is how we know that we are special, but we're not unique. God's love is for everyone.

Humility also recognizes that we are not perfect, and we depend on the God in whom we place our trust. While our ego may want to prove that it is separate and superior to others, a call toward humbleness keeps our ego in check. It doesn't negate it, but gives healthy boundaries that help our uniqueness claim the beautiful qualities we are intended to embody. Trusting God to shape us into who God calls us to be involves trust. Humility involves trust, and how we place our trust in God involves discipline.

In this morning's texts, Discipline is shown in prayer. The disciples are gathered together after Jesus ascends and they are praying without ceasing, dedicated to constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Discipline is a way of claiming our unity and covenant relationship with God. The idea of dying before we die, giving our life to the Lord, less of me and more of you, O Christ; that those who lose their life for Christ's sake will find it. Discipline is a form of surrender. But it is surrender with intention and purpose. 1 Peter: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour."

Although it's not a lion, there are lots of grizzly bears in Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park. Two brothers were hiking at the Logan Pass area in Glacier National Park in Montana. Leif and Eric Peterson, whom I know from various circles. Eric is our presbytery moderator here in the Inland Northwest, and they are both Eugene Peterson's sons. Leif lives in Whitefish and our families know each other. But one day as they hiked out in the Rocky Mountains above tree line, a grizzly bear charged them, running right toward them. Leif was in front, and had pulled out his pepper spray as their only defense. You've heard the term, "bluff charge" where a bear stops just short, trying to intimidate and test out the threat they perceive. The two brothers stood their ground and the bear wandered off. No spray needed.

"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert." Discipline, in the context of praying without ceasing and humbling ourselves, involves paying attention to the importance of giving God focus and attention, room to work in our hearts, our subconscious, our minds. Contemplative prayer, Centering Prayer, gathering together for worship and prayer: these are tools for discipline that invite a daily use.

Resistance is that third quality Peter mentions. Resisting our adversary as we are steadfast in our faith. You have a full calendar, a busy life, lots of projects and commitments? Taking 20 minutes to sit in silence may be inconvenient. But this is a great place, a reachable way to begin resistance. Resistance takes us deeper into prayer, builds on foundation of trust, and links us through relationship which celebrates our unity with God's great consciousness and purpose. Resistance has another word that defines it: we can also call it, "action."

True humility grounded in discipline sends us forth for action. We claim that every time we have communion. We partake of the elements, more than that we unite as the Body of Christ. Filled with Christ's Presence, transformed through the living Holy Spirit, we are not only claimed by Love and Grace, we are sent. We gather around the table and are sent out. We are, by virtue of our Baptisms, commissioned to live life in response to all God is and does in our life together.

Do you take the Bible seriously? Do you trust these words as the unique and authoritative word of God for your life? How will it look this week if you do what Peter says, by "casting all your anxieties on God?" How will it look this week as you listen to the news about violence, exploitation of corporate economies, environmental degradation, and hate crimes, to be humble under the mighty hand of God? What disciplines will you intentionally follow to shape your spirit and claim your unity with all there is, even your enemies? What will resistance look like in your life this week as you take action from the foundation of humble service?

May God bless this congregation as we embrace the minority movement of an alternative orthodoxy that questions the status quo, inspires hearts to love more deeply, and seeks to love, live, and learn the joy of faith. And may God be glorified now and forever. Amen.