

The Second Sunday after Christmas
5 January, Anno Domini 2025
1 Peter 4:12-19

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In our Lord and brother we see a very hard reality to accept - to bear the Name of Jesus, the very Name which is our source of help and comfort in every need, is also to be hated by the devil and the world and even our own flesh. There are no exceptions. It doesn't matter your age, your income, your gender, or your ethnicity. As St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Galatians, we are all one in Christ Jesus. That doesn't mean that all will suffer in the same way. But all will suffer. You will suffer for believing and confessing the Name of Jesus and ordering your life according to the divine Scriptures. To do so is by default to tell the world and your own flesh that they are wrong and evil. The desires of the Spirit are against the flesh and the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. This is ALWAYS true. At no time do the desires of the flesh agree with the desires of the Spirit. They are constantly at war with one another. Do not imagine, as some vainly do, that they can avoid this struggle. Every hour of every day we must be mindful of our own thinking and examine it in the light of what God has said. That takes work and effort and very often it means not doing what we want or what is easy or what is popular.

But there is also something else, even more important, that we see in the life of our Savior, and truly throughout the history of God's people - God always delivers His children. He strengthens us to speak in the face of resistance. He gives us patience. He provides our daily bread. And very often our Father delivers us from things that would harm our salvation by laying crosses and suffering upon us. But when He does, don't imagine for a second that this time, God will not come through and rescue you; that this time God will let your suffering and tribulations consume you; that this time His mercy and forgiveness will not be enough to cover over your guilt.

There are two particular dangers that we face in the midst of suffering. The first is that we equate our suffering with punishment. When we confess that salvation is found in Jesus alone and in no one else and are then accused of being closed-minded and arrogant; when we hold up the Word of God and defend the lives of

the preborn and those whom the world would cast aside as worthless and in response we are accused of being loveless haters of women; when we declare with Scripture that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ and we are anathematized by those who preach that we are saved by our works and our decisions - it is very easy to begin to think that perhaps we are the ones who are wrong, who have misunderstood the Word of God and that the hatred and persecution of so much of the world, especially from those who are deemed to be experts, is God's punishment for our error and arrogance.

But this is the common lot of the Church of all ages. You are not alone in this suffering and persecution. It is not unique to us in our day. The Blessed Doctor Martin Luther was tempted by these thoughts often as the weight of the whole Papacy as well the sword of the Holy Roman Empire were set against him to destroy him. When our Lord, Jesus Christ, spoke the truth and went about doing the merciful work of His heavenly Father, He was not well received by most. Some thought He was a drunk. Others thought He was a heretic and blasphemer. Others charged Him with rebellion against Caesar. The people of Nazareth, His home town, tried to drive Jesus off a cliff because of His preaching. More than once the Pharisees had stones in their hands ready to throw at our Lord's head.

Jesus could have looked at the hatred of those people and come to the conclusion that He was doing or saying something wrong and God was punishing Him for it. He could have questioned if He still was God's beloved Son and if His Father was still pleased with Him. If we had been driven into the wilderness and denied food for forty days would we not conclude that God hated us? And more than any of those times, as Jesus was hanging on the cross among condemned criminals being ridiculed and blasphemed, it's not hard to imagine why people looked at that and said "If God wants Him, let Him deliver Him," implying, of course, that God didn't want Him and wasn't actually pleased with Him. The cross would seem to be the conclusive denial of Jesus' claim "I do the will of my Father." If He had been, then why would God allow such a thing to happen to Him? Why would God allow Him to suffer so terribly, to be humiliated so deeply? Why was He being punished if He only ever did what is right? Surely that can't be loving!

Unless that cross, that suffering, that death is the epitome of love for the whole world, offering the Son of God, who was pleased even to do this will of His Father, as payment for our sins. Jesus' persecution and suffering and death aren't the whole story. None of it can be understood until Easter, when the one who suffered and died as the chief of sinners, was resurrected and vindicated as the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world and whose every Word IS divine

truth. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead not only demonstrates the truth of all that He preached and did, but also that His suffering was not punishment from God for His disobedience, but for ours and that God was truly pleased with His Son because He carried out the Father's will to save us. Our Lord didn't suffer for doing wrong but for doing and saying everything right. It was His innocence and perfect obedience that made Him the acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world. His suffering under the wrath of God was not on His own account but ours. He bore our punishment so that as His dear children we can say of our own suffering and tribulation for the faith and the truth of His Word "I am not being punished. I am blessed to suffer for the Name of the One who suffered for me."

Dear Christian, your Lord and Savior, suffered greatly during His earthly life but not because God hated Him. Rather, in Jesus' suffering, the wickedness of the world is brought to light because it hated and persecuted Him who is the very essence and embodiment of truth and love. In Jesus, who was hated from the moment He was conceived, we see clearly painted for us exactly what use the world has for Christ and for all who dare to confess and walk according to the divine truth. The only way to avoid the devil and the world's hatred, and even the hatred of your own flesh, is to deny the truth, to deny your Lord, and to give in to their will which will only destroy you as it does them.

Thus Peter urges you to consider yourself blessed when you are counted worthy of suffering the hatred and persecution of the world because your treasure is Jesus and you despise as rubbish all that the world prizes most highly. This suffering is one of the marks of faith and the true Church because where the truth is and where the Name of Christ is proclaimed, there the devil will attack in hopes of destroying you and silencing the saving truth exactly as He did with your Lord. Your suffering will hurt. At times it will be excruciating as you struggle to cling to God's promises, as you feel abandoned and alone. Your enemies will show you no mercy. But no matter because God Almighty has and He has promised to never take His mercy away from you. He will deliver you from every enemy within and without. Your suffering will hurt but it is not eternal. Like your Savior, you will be raised in glory and the truth of your faith will shine like the sun before all creation.

The other danger is that we conflate suffering on account of sin with suffering for Name of Christ. Because sin is a rejection of the divine will and order, sin naturally brings with it consequences for us and others which will ultimately mean suffering. Sin breaks and divides and hurts. Whether it is murder or gossip or sexual sins or despising preaching and the Sacraments or withholding our tithes or

teaching false doctrine or anger - sin always hurts. Sin is by nature destructive because it tears us away from God and drives out the Holy Spirit. When we rebel against the divine will, no matter how justified we may feel, we foolishly attack our own selves as well as everyone around us because the fact of the matter is that we live in a world that God created and ordered, not us. Living any other way than He has ordained, living contrary to the Ten Commandments, any of them, is self-harm. Thus the Lord has graciously instituted and ordained the office of the governing authorities to protect those who keep the law and punish those who seek to kill and steal and harm. Likewise, the Lord has instituted and ordained the Office of the Keys in the Church to forgive those who confess their sins but to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent and who cling to their sin. Those who break the law must suffer some kind of penalty or we will all be encouraged to act against our neighbor with impunity. Murderers and thieves and evildoers and meddlers need to be punished for their loveless deeds against their neighbors. That God forgives sin does not mean that He doesn't still administer earthly consequences for sin in order to turn us away from it and keep us mindful of our need for His mercy. Thus the child born of David's adultery with Bathsheba still died and there was great strife in David's family for the remainder of his life. David was forgiven but his sin still had consequences here on earth. Thus the Church in love and according to Jesus' strict command withholds forgiveness and the Holy Supper from those who are unrepentant and who confess a faith contrary to the Word of God with the fervent prayer that such discipline will bring about repentance and salvation. St. Peter warns and urges us against this kind of suffering, suffering for evil. We are to love our neighbor and do good to him. When we suffer for our sin we have no one to blame but ourselves. This is not suffering for the name of Christ. Just the opposite, really. It is suffering because we are unwilling to bear Christ's Name and live as a child of the light. We are unwilling to deny the sinful desires of our flesh and suffer the consequences of piety and godliness from the devil and unbelievers and our own flesh.

Children of God, do not suffer for the sake of evil. Do not put yourself in harm's way by indulging your flesh and trying to compromise with the world. You will hurt yourself and in gaining the world as your friend you will have lost the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. This suffering is a suffering that only leads to eternal death.

But you do not need to be afraid to suffer for the sake of Christ. You have seen how this suffering ends. The suffering of those who cling to Christ and speak the truth always ends in resurrection. When you are persecuted for the faith, you stand in the great company of the prophets and apostles and martyrs who have offered

their blood as witnesses to the resurrection and who now wear the crown of life. The suffering and death of Jesus has prepared your way. All His children must take up their cross and follow. But you are not alone. Christ Himself goes with you. Your Baptism stands as a firm testament that, despite how fiercely and loudly the devil and the world rage, they are wrong. You are God's beloved child and He is most certainly pleased with you. He affirms this to you not only in Word but also in the Body and Blood of His dear Son which He gives as constant testament to the forgiveness of all your sins and the resurrection which awaits you.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.