

No Good Deed
I Peter 3:13-22
Colebrook Congregational Church
May 21, 2017 / Sixth Sunday of Easter

No good deed goes unpunished. It is likely that we have all felt this at some point, or experienced this sentiment in some way. That no matter how much one intends to do a good thing, there is always someone who is ungrateful or it is in some way misinterpreted by others, causing trouble instead of the desired effect. And this sentiment fits really well with today's selection, as well as the whole of the First Epistle of Peter.

First Peter is addressed to the churches in Asia Minor, which were undergoing persecution of some kind at the hands of the Roman authorities. There was open hostility and oppression by the local peoples as well, directed toward those early Christians, and this Letter is an exhortation to persevere, to be steadfast, and it gives encouragement to continue doing their practical duties to God and to the Emperor.

The Letter also lifts up Jesus as the example to follow in the face of the difficulties they were enduring; and that is what today's selection focuses on. While again telling the persecuted to continue to do good for others, as is their Calling from God, they may end up suffering for their efforts. They are then reminded of what Jesus endured and went through. Jesus taught and preached the Good News of salvation, and then suffered for all our sins, dying painfully for His efforts. Jesus did that for them, and us, so they, and us, should be able to face those arrayed against them.

I've mentioned before about how there are other documents that confirm what is written in the history in the Bible. Things that give more credence and insight into the events, because they were written by an enemy or a neighbor, and yet still confirms one's account. Like how there is an Egyptian source that speaks of the Exodus, or Babylonian records confirming the Diaspora and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Outside sources, stuff like that. And for the early church, there are a bunch of letters and reports between governors, legates, and the emperor, discussing the Christians; and these give us great insight into what the Romans thought of the Christians and what they thought they were up to. It also illustrates how the Romans

were misunderstanding what the Christians were all about.

For example, Christians would gather weekly in fellowship and share Communion. We know what that means, we know how it goes. However, the Romans saw this as gathering to practice cannibalism, eating the body of someone called Christ and drinking his blood as well. What barbarism, they thought! Everything the early Christians did was twisted in this way, and they were persecuted for it. No matter what good deed they did, they were punished.

The musical *Wicked*, telling the story of how the Witch became the Wicked Witch, is a good example of how no good deed goes unpunished. Everything that Elphaba did, trying to make her sister's life easier, trying to save lives, or trying to liberate the animals from captivity, it all backfired. She ended up alienating her family and accidentally creating the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion.

That whole story makes it completely understandable why Elphaba flipped. Every good thing with every good intention that she attempted ended in failure and pain. It is understandable why anyone would give up even trying to do good after all that.

However, the message in the First Letter of Peter, while acknowledging that this may happen to believers, that their good work is misunderstood and that they are punished in some way, we are told that we should not give up, we should keep doing good things in spite of any punishment. The Letter says “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.”

I am not sure if I have ever spoken from the pulpit about my time as a hospital chaplain. They are not easy stories to tell or to hear, but given the theme, it would seem appropriate today, and I have tried to sanitize some of the details.

One day about fifteen years ago, I had the overnight shift, and I was called down to the Emergency Department by one of the Resident Doctors. A young woman had been brought in, and she was refusing to voluntarily drink the charcoal solution. The doctor had a team ready to hold her down and force a feeding tube into her in order to save her life, but the Resident wanted to try to avoid doing it in that painful way, and asked if I would be willing to try to talk her. I agreed and I was given a time limit for when the team would have to come in and force the matter.

I went into the room and I listened to her story. I transcribed every detail. And then we discussed hope. I could see the Resident and nurses through the window of the door, so I knew that my time was almost up, but she then started to drink the charcoal.

The Resident and I compared notes to see what we could do for her, and tried to talk to the on-call Psych and Social Services people for assistance. However, when morning came, instead of being involved in a discussion for the care of the patient, the Resident and I were punished. The Resident was punished for calling in a chaplain instead of immediately forcing the tube down the patient's throat when she refused to drink voluntarily. I was punished for trying to talk the patient into complying, for writing down her story on the wrong type of paper, and for waking up the on-call social worker. Apparently a turf war had broken out between the departments, and the actual needs of the patient took a back seat to the bickering about what the Resident and I did.

While the good deed that we did backfired on us, unlike Elphaba, we were not going to be discouraged from doing good works. We saved a life, and did so in a manner that did not cause more pain. We both agreed that we would do it again.

And that is the key thing here. We cannot be discouraged from doing good work and good deeds in our own lives and together as a church, even if it backfires on us. While it may be at times that no good deed goes unpunished, what is more important is what we do next. Do we let the setbacks change us, like they did to Elphaba? Or do we stay strong in our faith and keep carrying on? As Christians, we have committed ourselves to Christ's example, and He did not give up in the face of suffering when He saved us all, so we should keep up the good work.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for the advice of the faithful from so long ago. Let it speak to us and inspire us this day as it did to your people millenia ago. Please give us the strength to heed their words and to endure any suffering that comes from doing good works in Your name. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, and for the gifts of Your word, Your power and Your love.

Loving God, When we see life only for ourselves, please forgive us. Help us to hear your transforming love speaking to us of respect, dignity and worth, telling us that we are loved and that we are to love one another.

We pray for those around us who need your care. We pray for those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, broken-hearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. For the life of our community and all those who put their trust in You for all our presents and all our futures, and we pray that Your loving-kindness to the world be offered through our hands, our words, our deeds, & our hearts.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to better understand the witness of Your Followers. We ask that You comfort us when we are afraid or in need. Give us the strength to live with the courage to overcome all obstacles. Fill us with Your Spirit and make us living carriers of of Your Love to all who need it. Ignite our Hearts to act as You want us to do, and help us to recognize the needs of our neighbors.

We especially pray for:

The Suddath Family
Sean Larose

Deanna Muzzulin Sue Kenny
Family of Greg Roberts

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 66:8-20

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. *Selah* Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

1 Peter 3:13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet 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. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For 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, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who 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 persons, were saved through water. And 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.