

Sermon for 5-29-11
1 Peter 4:1-11

I was greeted on Tuesday morning with the news that a young mother had been strangled by her boyfriend in Ellwood City over the weekend. There was a monster tornado that destroyed much of Joplin Missouri this week. We live in a world where there is violence and suffering. Many of us feel helpless. We are fatigued by the continued decline in our community. We are upset at the destruction that has taken place. We are frustrated. There is nothing we can do and our community is going down the drain. There will just be another disaster where help is needed. How do we live the resurrection life in the midst of this news?

We are called to imitate Christ, who was willing to suffer in order to avoid sinning. We are called to join in this way of living that shows that obeying God, not avoiding hardship is the most important motivation.

We make a clear break with sin when we suffer and keep obeying God in spite of the suffering. Our congregation provides an example of that. We offered the use of the manse to a single mother. Things were not easy in that relationship. Yet we offered the use of the manse to another family. Despite the work and difficulty of this we are trying to obey God's call as we understand it to continue to use the manse as transitional housing for families in need. Living the resurrection life is not just governed by human feelings like what is easiest or what makes us feel best. This new life is governed by God's will.

We have all lived based on human desires. I know almost all of us can say I am not living in the way described in 1 Peter 4 verse 3. We are not out getting drunk or sleeping with everyone or losing control of our actions in an excessive way. Yet, we have lived with the desire for comfort, pleasure, and safety as the most powerful determiners of our actions. However long we lived that way was sufficient. We have no need to go back to that way of living, saying I have missed out on doing this for me. We will all have to tell God why we lived the way we did.

People can not understand why we would not live life seeking our own pleasure. All the actions in verse three have at their root personal desires unconcerned with others. A life without moral restraint, one that tends towards excesses is a common result of self-focus. When we no longer live that way, others living for themselves will not react well. It surprises them because they can not imagine living any other way. It angers them because their way of living is revealed to be meaningless. [A life lived only for one's self is empty and wasted.]

Christ came not to save us from physical death. Christ came not so we could do whatever we want. Christ came not so we would never suffer. Christ came so that we might live in the Spirit as God does. We can't stop all violence or fix every disaster. So how do we live in the way God desires? What do we do?

We live taking seriously that Jesus is not done interacting with the world. We discipline ourselves and pray. (We have a sound mind, thinking about and evaluating situations maturely and holding them up to God in prayer.) We continue to listen for where the Spirit of God is

leading us to engage in our community and in times of disaster. Our prayer is what is your will for us God in the midst of discomfort. Our prayer is what is your will for us God in the midst of decline. Our prayer is what is your will for us God in the midst of destruction.

1 Peter makes clear that no matter what happens, no matter how we feel, the resurrection life is focused on love, hospitality, and service in community. All three of these are ‘other focused.’

Number 1: We maintain constant love for one another. Love seeks the others good before our own. The famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13 puts it like this. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In a life with out love every word is suspicious, every action is misunderstood, conflicts abound. If we live without love, there is no way that the church can do ministry in the community or beyond. Instead we will dwell on our hurt feelings. We will fight to get our individual way. Love covers over offenses small and large. Love does not point out every flaw or misstep. Love allows us to forgive because we know the forgiveness of God. Love builds up.

Number 2: We are hospitable to one another. Hospitality seeks to care for others before ourselves. The Greek word has the aspect of loving strangers. Hospitality is growing in relationship with those in our church who are different than us, growing in relationship with those we don’t know.

In a life without hospitality, our self-focus is revealed as we begrudge the time or effort it takes to welcome another. We are easily split into factions focused on our differences. In a family oriented culture like ours, going out of our way to develop a new relationship with someone in church can seem unnecessary. We have all the connections that we need. Yet growing in relationship with each other is an important piece in enabling us to serve God together. Hospitality welcomes new ideas and takes risks to serve God together.

Number 3: We serve one another with whatever gift we have received from God. God has given each one of us a gift, a gift to be used for the sake of others. Each member of this church has a gift God desires for us to use in our ministry to and with one another.

We can choose to live neglecting to use our gift. We can choose to say we have none. It takes time and effort to exercise our gift. When we don’t use our gift, we put the burden of ministry on others in the community of faith. When we use our gift selfishly it builds up pride and tears down community. Complaining about using our gift drives out thanks and joy. But when we serve others with the gift freely given to us by the grace of God in Christ, we reveal that grace. Serving with God’s gift blesses.

Love, hospitality, and service in the community of faith are part of living the resurrection life. These three ‘other focused’ ways of living enable us to follow God’s will doing ministry beyond ourselves.

There were two groups of aspiring writers. Each group presented their writing for critique. One group tore into each other pointing out all the short comings, every place they disagreed. The second group looked past the initial short comings, offered encouragement, shared ideas, and built up each other. Not one person from the first group became a writer, but several from the second group ended up writing as a profession.

The life of love, hospitality, and service is what we say that we will live together as members of the church. We reaffirm this as new members join our church this morning. We intentionally and in a disciplined way seek to have these things expressed in our words and actions. We believe that we are called by God to live this resurrection life together. We have hope that we will have an impact on our community and make a difference in places of destruction as we do God's will together.

This new life is not lived with our own words or our own strength, but God's. "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies." So let's not focus on our lack of energy. Let's not focus on our own needs, how our comfort, safety, our pleasure might be disturbed. Let's not focus on the difficulty of the task.

Rather let us join together as a church filled with love, hospitality, and gifts, ready to serve and speak with the strength God supplies.