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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Easter 4 (Confirmation Sunday)

1 Peter 2:19-25

FOLLOW YOUR SHEPHERD EVEN THROUGH SUFFERING

I will share with you that one of the most emotional moments for me in my work as a Lutheran pastor is when the confirmands are all standing before me at the Lord's altar ready to make their vow to remain faithful to the Lord until death. Those young, innocent eyes looking up at you waiting for their cue -perhaps proud or happy or nervous or filled with faith. Some of them I baptized. So much careful instruction has been poured into them by parents and teachers. And here they are, those young eyes looking up at you... and you can't help but think, "Oh man, you kids, you dear young Christians -you have no idea what you're in for."

I don't mean to sound like a negative Nellie on such a joyful day. But the reality is there are tremendous forces both in the spiritual world and in the physical world just waiting to pounce on these young souls to destroy or waylay their faith in Christ so that they lose their salvation. There is plenty of suffering for any person living in this sin-saturated world. But persons who openly confess their loyalty to Jesus Christ are making themselves special targets.

This isn't merely a detail of our Christian faith. It's the very thing we were called into. It's the very life we say yes to when we take our confirmation vows. This is not a message you'll often hear in the pop-culture mega churches. A message of the necessity of suffering does not tend to draw huge crowds. But the message about the necessity of suffering is central to Scripture.

As these young people grow into adulthood they'll suffer some things that can't be helped -like a sickness or an accident. They'll also suffer some things that they have only themselves to blame for. But on top of these things, if they want to remain affiliated with Jesus Christ they'll

have to suffer specifically for that. Listen again to 1 Peter 2: *It is commendable if a person bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

If Christ is your Shepherd and you are His sheep He will be leading you and you will be following in His steps. And His steps lead through suffering. Jesus once said, *If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.* Another time Jesus said, *I have chosen you out of the world. That's why the world hates you.*

Of course, there is no other suffering that matches the degree of suffering Christ endured. For that matter, then, you have a Shepherd who understands what suffering feels like -unfairness, persecution, mocking, loneliness and, of course, physical pain. He has felt the deep guile and great might of the evil foe aimed directly at him and He knows how it feels to be abandoned by His heavenly Father.

As we follow Jesus He sets the example for us of how to endure it. It's not just that Jesus didn't retaliate. Rather, Jesus entrusted Himself to His heavenly Father. Jesus trusted that the Father knew what was best and in the end His heavenly Father would deliver Him. 1 Peter 2 says, *Jesus committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

Who knows what lies before you? Perhaps a hostile high school teacher who humiliates you in front of everyone because you believe the world was created by God in six days; perhaps teammates in the locker room who tear into you because you won't go along with ruining a certain girl's reputation or who leave you friendless because you won't smoke pot; perhaps a grandmother or uncle who is mortified that you won't commune at their church; perhaps one day protestors marching in front of your church and coworkers as a result keeping their distance from you. Perhaps God Himself will in some

way permit the bottom to drop out on you, allow something that shakes you to the core, so as to bring you back to Himself and keep you from straying away in spiritual laziness.

Whatever suffering may be in your path, there is one thing you get to enjoy that Christ did not get to enjoy. You have the assurance, no matter how much things might hurt, no matter how bad it gets, no matter how things might look or feel, God will never abandon, forget or leave you. Jesus didn't get that benefit. God the Father forsook Jesus as He hung on the cross. But God is with you every second, every step of the way. You can entrust yourself entirely to God because He's fully aware of what's happening in your life and in fact His purpose is to bless and mature your faith through suffering and enable you to drink more deeply of His grace than ever before.

It was *because* God abandoned Jesus on the cross that He will never abandon you. You see, underneath all this, Jesus' sufferings accomplished something your and my sufferings never could: Jesus' sufferings atoned for all our sins. Jesus' sufferings take away our guilt. That is the basis for everything in our Christian faith -including our ability to follow Christ through suffering. Never imagine now that God is ever holding anything against you or that He who called you by name in Baptism has lost interest in you. Granted, sometimes God allows you to suffer in order to keep you from sin or to extract sin from your life. But He never causes you to suffer to *pay* for your sins. By His death Christ has already paid for our sins in full. In this way Christ's death insures that God is always, only working things toward your eternal salvation, that even your sufferings are only a sign of God's care -provided only that you don't turn away from Him. 1 Peter 2 tells us: *Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, by his wounds you have been healed.*

When you are hurting, let the wounds of Christ continue to heal you. Go to the Lord's Supper. There receive the body and blood of Christ who died on the cross for you. There receive into yourself His full and free forgiveness once again. There be made whole and be restored to your heavenly Father once again. There find your salvation from all things bad once again. There find your Shepherd who leads you once

again in the way 1 Peter 2 encourages, *For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

Christ your Shepherd will oversee everything for your soul. He knows when you need hardship. He also knows when you need relief and what form of relief you need. He knows how to turn your tears into dancing. How knows when to lift you up as on eagles wings. He kindly will give you happy blessings to encourage you along the way - in the same way that He enjoyed the Mount of Transfiguration before He went down to Jerusalem.

In the Gospel Lesson today, John 10, we heard Jesus say that He has come that you may have life and have it to the full. As we follow our Shepherd through suffering, keep in mind suffering is not the destination. We follow Him *through* suffering. In other words, anything we suffer is only a passing thing. We follow Him through suffering into glory. Glory is the permanent thing. Christ suffered and died, but He rose again from the dead and now lives exalted at God's right hand. That's the path Christ walked. That's the path you and I will walk as we follow Him. Christ's path leads to the permanent joy of everlasting life heaven. And that permanent joy is already yours, already belongs to you and is reserved for you as you follow your Shepherd.

May the Good Shepherd by His Spirit keep us all on that path where He leads and we follow.