

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
June 5, 2011  
Rev. Diana Hartman  
Worship Theme: Jesus Provides For Us  
1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11 and John 17:1–11

Have you ever been singled out as the “odd one” in a crowd? Have you ever felt like you were the only person in the conversation with your point of view? Have you ever felt marginalized because of your Christians beliefs and how you lived out those beliefs? Have you ever suffered for doing the right thing? The early Christians were often verbally abused and harassed for their lifestyle and beliefs. In some cases, the persecution was even more intense and deadly. It is unclear what the source of the suffering was that Peter addressed in his letter to the early Christians, but the language of this letter reveals that the sufferings of believers derive from real and powerful sources.

Peter’s letter provided comfort and reassurance for those who faced, or would be facing, persecution due to their commitment to follow Jesus. For early Christians, “the Empire was not so much concerned with what they believed as they were concerned with how they acted upon those beliefs. As long as the allegiances to the ruling elites were not compromised, the Empire seldom cared what the masses believed. But to preach good news to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, and sight to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed and to act on those beliefs was to reject conformity with those in power. Living the Gospel was threatening to the powers and principalities. Liberation for the oppressed is a direct assault on the forms of subjugation society had legitimized. Thus Peter writes, ‘Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you’ (4:12).” (Feasting on the Word, VOI2-2, p 532)

So, the question we ask today, of the majority of us who have not suffered for our faith, is whether this text is pertinent to us. Is this text speaking only to those individuals who have been oppressed, beaten, or exiled for their faith? I think the answer is no. This text is not addressed only to those who have physically suffered for their faith. This text is speaking to all Christians.

Whether we consider persecution, harassment, verbal abuse, or the more common distresses and frustrations we all feel every day, Peter reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering. The Christian faith is not individualistic. It’s not solely about our individual relationship with Jesus Christ. This is important to be sure, but at its core, Christianity invites people to become part of one body of Christ.

Peter reminds us that we are a part of a whole when he proclaims, “Resist Satan, steadfast in faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering” (5:9). We are in this together, Jesus provides for us, or as John Donne wrote, “no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the

continent, a part of the main.” We do not exist merely for our own needs. Such awareness is essential to our ability to relate to the needs and troubles of others.

The ability to empathize, to achieve solidarity, and to find common ground ultimately stems from an understanding of ourselves as part of a larger whole. The further removed we are from this understanding, the less able we are to engage the world in Christ-like love, the very essence of which is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This can be successful only if we understand our own existence to be intricately tied to and part of the existence of our neighbor. We are team players.

“Remember the Titans?” No, I don’t mean the race of giant mythological gods of Greek mythology. No, instead I am referring to the movie by the same name released back in 2000 and was based on actual events.

The story is about a diverse group of high school boys, drawn together through a common interest in football. The boys are transformed from boys filled with mistrust, bigotry, and hatred into a team of young men who support and respect one another. This transformation doesn’t come without a price. The Mighty Titans suffer mightily as they are being changed, molded, and transformed into a unified team.

It’s the summer of 1971 in Alexandria, Virginia where the T.C. Williams High School and football team, the Mighty Titans, are being forcibly integrated. The school board hired Coach Herman Boone, played by Denzel Washington as the head football coach. The prior head coach, Coach Yost, played by Will Patton, is asked to remain as the assistant and defensive coach. Racial tension hangs heavy in the air and the team and coaching staff are polarized along racial lines. Coach Boone pairs up the players, a black player with a white player and off they go to Gettysburg for their annual summer football camp.

It’s obvious that from the coaches to the players, this is not a team. Even though they have been brought together through a common interest in football, the distrust and hatred keep them from being united. In an effort to focus their anger and aggression into playing tough football, Coach Boone works them day in and day out to the point of exhaustion.

Until all thirty players get to know one another, Coach Boone insists that they will have three sweltering, bruising practices each day. So, stubbornly they draw their muddy, bloody, broken, torn bodies through one practice after another. And then it begins to happen. Slowly but surely, the transformation moves like a smoldering fire over these young men. The pain and suffering they experience is very real as finally, they begin to act and play like a team. They bond and become a unified squad. But this is only the beginning. Now they must return to the real world where their families, friends, and townspeople surround them with a different idea.

Being transformed into a unified team and suffering seem to go hand-in-hand. The idea of transforming a group of individuals into a cohesive, unified body is just what we are reading about this morning in 1 Peter and what Jesus is praying for in the gospel of John.

Apparently, from the onset of the church, the Christian community was arguing. They argued over who could share a meal together. They argued over who represented the “real”

church. They argued over who was and who was not an authentic Christian based on the spiritual gifts exhibited by each. These arguments caused suffering from within while the Empire brought suffering from the outside.

It would appear that suffering and disunity in the church is nothing new. Today, we have our denominations and sub-denominations. We argue over who can be ordained and what words we can use when we pray and what music we can use in worship. We argue over our alliances with this group or that. We argue over how our churches should participate in secular life or how religion interacts with the state. It all causes enormous pain in the body of Christ.

When Jesus prays that his followers “may be one as he and the Father are one”, he is praying us into the mystery of the triune God. Not just that we should each become one with God, or one with Christ, but that we should become one with each other in the way Jesus and the Father are one. And this is where the pain lies even for us today. How are we to be unified in this way? What does this type of union look like? How is Jesus’ prayer to be fulfilled?

What if we considered the unity that Jesus prays for us not as a massive block of agreement and conformity but as a kind of interweaving dance? “What if we considered the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as being about joyful interplay and glorious dancing and we are all invited into that dance? If we tried this idea on for a while, could it affect how we view our own disagreements with our brothers and sisters? Perhaps the vision toward which we strive is not one of total agreement but of the ability to join, in our different ways, in the common dance of faith. It is possible that this is what Christian unity looks like—a body as Paul said, with many parts, a dance with many dancers, a song with many voices.

The challenge to us, in response to all our diversity, is to say yes. Yes, those other people really are Christians too. Yes, there is pain in all this diversity, but there is also possibility. Yes, there is struggle, but there is also glory.” (FOTW, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 543)

Remember the Titans? When they got back to town, their lives got pretty difficult and complex—girlfriends didn’t understand, parents wouldn’t accept the new friendships, and families remained segregated in the stands as they watched the team play. Society put pressure on this team and the team suffered alienation from the society around them. Yet, they suffered together, and they supported one another. The unification was still ongoing and it seems that the coaches were the last to be brought into the huddle. In the end, this team led a town away from its bigotry and hatred. In the end, the team and the town united as they respected and supported one another and they marched together in victory.

1 Peter also refers to the devil who “like a roaring lion...prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” I suppose there are many ways to interpret this text. But perhaps one way of looking at it is that one of the greatest forms of violence the devil can render is to separate people from one another—that is, for us to forget and abandon our ideas of being one in Christ, of being united with all Christians around the world in our struggles, triumphs,

joys and fears. So, to forget our connection would be to sever the most important tie that binds people of faith together in the commitment to love one another as Christ loved.

Indeed, these ties are being tested today, as we argue with our brothers and sister from every side of the Christian faith over ordination issues, sexuality questions, and more. Just as Christians around the world grow more able to be in good communication and learn with and from one another, so we also find ourselves sorely tested. We are tested by such things as radically different interpretations of the wideness of God's love and the boundaries of the church. We are tested by the full inclusion of all God's people. And we are tested by deep and historically shaped emotions about the way God's vision for economic justice has concerned Christians in dominant countries differently from those in developing countries. Being one in Christ will necessarily require that we seek ways to honor the particular gifts, experiences, and insights of each believer and also that we support one another through accountability to the Gospel that we hold in highest authority which states we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Whether divisive arguing that brings suffering to the body of Christ is the work of the devil, or simply what comes with differing opinions on emotionally charged issues, is for each of us to decide on our own. This Christian community can be wild, frustrating, and crazy, but we place our trust in that prayer of Jesus. The disciple Jesus loved, and the community he loves now, lived and still lives—enveloped by that prayer recorded and read for us in the Gospel of John.

As one body, today we gather around the Lord's Table, where we are united with all our brothers and sisters of every time and place through the body and blood of Christ. During this time, let each of us consider our complicity in the suffering of the body of Christ and how we will bring comfort and union by truly loving *all* of our neighbors and appreciating the beauty and the strength that our God given diversity provides. For sure, it is imperative that the differences that exist between Christians not be allowed to sever the unity that Jesus provided for us and prays we will never abandon when he prayed, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.