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1 Peter 3: 13-16

“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.”

I read a quote from Dr. Martin Shaw this week and it goes like this *“There’s nothing ordinary about decency, courage under fire, compassion, tenacity, lion-heartedness, and that is what is being called forth in a moment - a deeply mythic moment like this.”* I have no idea to what Dr. Shaw was referring specifically, but truly it fits like a glove for these days and the hard times in which we are living.

If we think back to the road which Jesus traveled, we can quickly see that his controversial words and actions were not well received by the power structure around him. Jesus was courageous under fire against unjust authority, he was compassionate toward the downtrodden, tenacious and lion-hearted in his love for those living under oppression, cruelty and the poverty brought about by dishonest leaders. It became clear over the course of his ministry that his powerful teachings of love and charity would not be tolerated by the authority figures around him.

Eventually, his followers became emboldened by the Holy Spirit to follow in the footprints of Jesus, and they too, would be hunted down and brutally killed for their outspoken bravery.

These words from 1 Peter resonate today as prophetic and dangerous. They instruct us to do the things and say the words Jesus would do and say as he walks along beside us in this world! 1 Peter tells us to do the right thing even when others will judge us harshly, with their words and even in their harmful deeds to silence us. Peter tells us that when we suffer for doing what is right, we are blessed and to not be intimidated. We are to do everything with gentleness and reverence, keeping our consciences clear as we serve Christ in all that we say or do. I’d like to read you something our Bishop Scott Benhase wrote this past Sunday in reference to Peter telling us that we have been made into a holy people by the mercy of God: Bishop Benhase writes - “Now, such knowledge can be dangerous if it’s not accepted with a profound sense of humility. Such knowledge could make us smug and self-righteous with a ‘holier than thou” attitude. But that’s not the kind of holiness God has called us to embody.” (end quote)

When you choose to speak out against oppression, and wrong doing by those appointed to protect us, there will be consequences. When we call out the unjust, provocative and merciless behaviors of our chosen leaders, there will be other powerful voices shouting against us, especially when we are asking for equity from the powerful to be shared with the least among us, or when we come up against the menacing

prejudice of those who would instill their hatred and fear in us and those around us. We are to be God's holy people, walking and talking in humility and empowered by the fierce Love of Jesus Christ.

Peter goes on to say, "*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you...*" The hope in us as Christians is the love of Jesus. As we move through this life there are ideologies and ethics and beliefs we latch onto *or which* latch onto us - things like justice, peace, forgiveness, love, equality, mercy, sharing, compassion. As we grow and mature into our faith, hopefully we begin to cultivate the ability to articulate these beliefs with the gentleness, clarity and reverence to which Peter refers. This kind of clarity and reverence in making our defense, requires first thinking with the heart and mind of Christ, rather than with the mind of the world around us. To contemplate the events of our day - the broken relationships, the oppressive ideologies, the burdening of one group of people in order to enrich another, the lack of compassion for our elderly, the undoing of our earth. These are just a few sorrows shattering the image of Christ in our world. Putting Christ first usually takes steadfast courage and lion-heartedness, doesn't it? Along with humility, it takes faithful dedication to what we Christians are called to do - to serve the poor, to speak up for the downtrodden, to feed the hungry, to care for the widow and children, to do justice and mercy with clarity, passion and reverence. I'm not saying it will be safe or easy - we only have to look back at the disciples to see that prophetic honesty and outspokenness is neither safe nor easy. For Peter passionately tells us: "Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your 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." In light of what's going on in our world today, in each instance we must ask ourselves several questions before we respond. Here are a few of the questions I believe are important: "How am I called to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus?" "How can I respond with integrity, love, gentleness and reverence?" and finally, "If Jesus were walking along this road with me this very hour, how might he respond to what we are seeing?"

It is my sincere hope and prayer that we will all serve God's purposes for good during these coming weeks, months and all the years of our lives. So be brave and lion-hearted, my Christian friends, and remember that the Holy Spirit has been given to fill us with the love of Christ and the courage and grace in doing His will. We are no longer to live by human standards but by the will of God, with mercy and humility.

I want to be clear here - there are so many examples of generosity and hope in our world. There are plenty of heroes in our communities doing the work of God during these challenging times of isolation and fear, and it's a joy to see! This past week, here in Americus we watched & were blessed to participate as the Harvest of Hope Food Bank gave out huge amounts of food to people who are hungry - everyone who asked, received. There are several groups of people all around our state who have sewn thousands of protective masks - some are sold to those who can afford them, but many are freely given away to those who need them. We see people coming together in spirit to encourage and support our medical professionals, police officers, teachers and public leaders. We see family members and loved ones

separated by these months of isolation who manage to stay connected by the love they share, because they believe to stay home is to protect those whom they love. And really, could we have imagined how much good it has done our earth's ozone layer to stay home leaving our cars parked in the driveway! I know there are many more examples of great hope which you have seen in your community. Even in times such as these, we seem to insist on being the hands and feet of Jesus, and I'm inspired by what I see out there!

I'd like to leave you with this thought: the life we now live is merely a whisper in time - in the blink of an eye, our earthly life is finished. We may "spend" our youth trying to figure out the mysteries of life, trying to find the answers to all the "Why" questions. As we age, the questions become "Who," and "When?" The answers I have found to the who and when are pretty simple really - Love God; Love each other; Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. Love them Now. Amen.