

GET REAL

Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

The first Christians suffered persecution for their faith. There was the persecution of Jews who became Christians by Jews who did not. Recall that before his conversion, Paul was himself a persecutor of the followers of Jesus. More extensive was the persecution of the early Christians by the Roman Empire, culminating in the “Great Persecution” by the Emperor Diocletian in the beginning of the fourth Century in which nearly half of the recorded martyrdoms of Christians took place. As you might imagine, the persecution of the followers of Jesus was an important factor in the thinking of the early Church, and you can see this in various places in the New Testament. One of these is in our reading from the First Letter of Peter where he tells his readers not to be surprised by the “fiery ordeal” they are suffering. This, he instructs them, is a test, and as bad as it may be, it is a reason for rejoicing because they are sharing in Christ’s sufferings. This suffering will redound to their glory when the glory of Christ is revealed to the world. “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to God’s eternal glory in Christ, will... restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” The message here might be summed up: trouble is certain; suffering is redemptive.

In our time, Oprah Winfrey has adopted this message in the course of creating her own empire, which in many ways is far larger than that of Rome. She has persistently treated suffering as beneficial, turning the black church’s ethos of self-reliance in the face

of suffering into an exaltation of suffering itself, according to one scholar. “By making all experiences of suffering into occasions to improve oneself, Oprah ends up—absurdly—making suffering into a desirable experience.” Of course, if it is possible for strong people to overcome suffering and failure by their own will and a bit of therapy, then those who have not done so have only themselves to blame for their misery.

Another scholar has likened Oprah’s method to that of the 19th century evangelist, Charles Grandison Finney, who used what was called the “anxious bench” in his revival meetings. This was a pew set aside for sinners who would be identified and then prayed for by the rest of the congregation. Members of the crowd would eagerly anticipate who would sit on the bench and whether or not they would be saved while the preacher prodded confessions from them. With Oprah, ever believer in miracles and angels and a generic spirituality as preacher, her guests would confess and be redeemed daily on her show. Though some of this surely grew out of Oprah’s experience in the black church, the result ultimately became the cult of Oprah herself, a sort of New-Age feminism that was focused on her, mostly giving the easiest and glibbest answers to the hard questions of life, rarely asking tough questions, and in the bargain cultivating an audience of millions who believed because she believed. (*The N.Y. Times* 5/28/11, Mark Oppenheimer, A20.)

There are many reasons for people to be religious, and not least of all because we are brought up to be religious. One of the things that causes people to come to and stay with religion is trouble. As a case in point, story has it that the Buddha grew up in a palace where he was sequestered from the world and all of its troubles. One day he snuck out of the palace and encountered that world of troubles, and with this he renounced his

wealth and privilege and set out on a life of spiritual discovery, searching for a way to overcome the inevitability of human suffering in the world. The religions of the world, our own included, all try to make sense of trouble, to teach us its origins and how it may be endured and ultimately overcome.

The story of the Ascension in the Book of Acts is instructive. The setting for the story is the last of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Jesus effectively tells the apostles to forget about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. That ship has sailed. That isn't what Jesus is about. He tells them instead to seek and receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and so empowered to become the church. Then there is this terrific and rather hilarious scene of Jesus going up into a cloud with the apostles watching him go. Bon voyage, Jesus! Angels are then immediately on the scene, as if Jesus knew the apostles would not understand what he was telling them. The angels ask the apostles why they are staring up into heaven. Their work is here, not up there. So get to work! At which point they go back to Jerusalem and become the church and live in the community of the Holy Spirit. They will not avoid trouble by doing this. On the contrary, they will be plunged into trouble, if for no other reason than that they have been charged to love their neighbors in such a way that the trouble of others will be their trouble as well. The community of the church is not an escape from trouble, which in any case cannot be avoided. Rather it is help in time of trouble. Thus, in the midst of trouble we are not alone. There's no point in looking up into the sky. The Holy Spirit is here in our midst and specifically in the church when the church is behaving like the body of Christ in the world.

In the First Letter of Peter, we are led to believe that suffering is redemptive, that by suffering we learn lessons or are made stronger or proved worthy or something like that. There is, of course, some truth in this, though I think we should not make too much of it, because suffering can also crush a person and reduce her or him to nothing but suffering and despair. Suffering is not desirable, and it is not to be sought. It is a fact of life in the world which must be met and overcome as best we are able to do. Jesus, for example, did not seek the suffering of the cross. He was made to suffer. Insofar as suffering exists, it is the work of the church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to address suffering and eliminate it to the greatest possible extent. This is the church's work here on the plane on which we live. It is not work that will be accomplished by gazing up into the heavens.

Most of us I trust will agree that it is not the mission of the church to make its members feel badly and unworthy and to despair of the goodness of God's creation—there's been too much of that in the history of the church. At the same time, though, it is not the church's mission to make us be happy, if by happy is meant content and complacent in the face of the world's troubles. The mission of the church is to make us real, which is to say to inspire us and enable us to live lives that are full of compassion for all with whom we share this world; to be able to understand ourselves as the creatures of grace and thereby to live gracefully; to cause us to see ourselves and others honestly and discover how we may be rightly-related to one another in all the circumstances of life, when there is trouble and when there is not. The mission of the church is here, in this world. Its members are not an audience, as in the case of the church of Oprah, with her narcissism and silly appeals to psychics and faith healers and intuitives and other

charlatans to gull the gullible. We are called by the Holy Spirit of Christ Jesus to be a community of faith active in love. Not a cult of personality—don't forget, Jesus goes off—but not a generic spirituality either. The Holy Spirit is a specific spirit, inspiring a specific form of life in a community where members are loved into loving in the holy hope that by doing so all will be well. Amen.

Seventh Sunday of Easter, June 5, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church