

“Where Are Your Wounds?”

1 Peter 4:12-16, 5:6-11

Andrew Foster Connors

7th Sunday in Easter

May 28, 2017

Imagine for a moment that you are a parent of a 9 year-old boy. It's a weekday and you wake up your son, drag him out of bed, pester him to get dressed, eat breakfast and brush his teeth. You pull together his lunch, make sure he has his backpack, brush your fingers through his bed-head, and shuffle him out the door. You pull up at school, and dish out your daily admonitions: “have a good day, son, listen to your teachers, and I'll see you at the end of the school day.”

What you don't know on this particular day is that you won't see him after school. Because on this day Immigrations and Custom Enforcement – ICE – will follow you home, put you in handcuffs, and drag you to detention where you will stay for the next several months, leaving your family without your paycheck, your pregnant wife without a partner, and your two children without a second parent. Such is the experience of Jesus Peraza who faces deportation as he goes before a judicial hearing this week.¹ [Jesus]² – held in prison for months for the “crime” of crossing a border. The crime of fleeing the gangs of Honduras after you witnessed murder. The crime of going where safety and work can be found. The crime of being a good employee, a present husband and father, whose wife will deliver his third child in 2 months. For all the promises we've heard from the Trump Administration about deporting criminals, [Jesus's] situation makes it clear that our American policies are dividing families, disrupting businesses, destabilizing communities, and spreading fear.

I would add “threatening the church” except that this is not true of the Church, on the whole, in North America. We have constructed a faith where the trials and tribulations of [Jesus] and many like him are irrelevant to our purpose. Where faith is mostly an evacuation plan from this world instead of God's gift to transform it by transforming us.

I think that's why Peter's words to the church in Asia Minor are so difficult for us to relate to. Don't be surprised that you'll be tested, that you'll suffer, he says. That comes with the Christian territory. Peter assumes that when you follow Christ, when you take on the name Christian, it means you're likely to suffer. The powers will notice that you don't bow down to the local idols and they'll make you suffer for it. They'll notice that you won't engage in violence and they'll make you suffer for it. They'll notice that your first allegiance is not to any leader or any nation but to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ. And you'll suffer for it.

¹ I met Jesus' brother this week at a rally against his deportation. See also <http://www.wbaltv.com/article/undocumented-baltimore-man-faces-deportation-to-honduras/9180176>.

² I use [] to differentiate [Jesus] Peraza from the Jesus of the Bible, though the connection is as biblical as they come.

You don't have to look far to see Peter's assumption confirmed across the world. Ask the Coptic Christians who continue to die as martyrs because of their faith.³ Look at the dwindling populations of Christians in every country in the Middle East save the United Arab Emirates.⁴ Hear the stories of martyrs across the world whose worship of Christ and whose practice of the love and forgiveness that he demands is a direct threat to governments and people opposed to that way of living in the world.

And yet even as I honor their steadfast love of the Lord, I hesitate to raise them up as examples for us because too often we respond to their example only with gratitude for our nation's First Amendment. "Thank God we have the freedom to worship here," we say. "Aren't we lucky to live in a nation that allows for freedom of worship." As if there was no [Jesus] nearby suffering in our midst. As if there were no poor widows getting left in the cold by Caesar's tax policies. As if there were no peacemakers beaten up on the lawns of the powerful in our country. As if there were no Christians in our land executed simply for gathering together in Bible study. As if there were are no Christians who pay a price for their love of their neighbor in workplace, or in their neighborhood, or in their school. I am truly grateful for our First Amendment. The fact that we can wake up on a Sunday morning and gather together to worship our God – it's a beautiful achievement toward peace - but that's only half the effort for Christians. The world needs to see the church willing to suffer wherever Jesus is.

It's no wonder we find it so difficult to relate to a book that assumes that to be a Christian means to expect suffering for your beliefs, not when we've constructed a faith where the trials and tribulations of [Jesus] and many like him are irrelevant to our purpose. Not when we've constructed a faith to go hand in glove with our local deities. We want to be able to eat our little cracker and drink our little wine *and* bless the rich and give them the keys to our kingdoms. We want to be able to give glory and honor and praise to the peacemaking God on Sunday morning *and* go and praise the war-making gods the next day. We want to be able to hear those freeing words, "you are forgiven" on Sunday *and* preach "law and order" to vulnerable aliens and "work makes freedom" to the poor the rest of the week.

Maybe the reason that we don't connect with Peter's expectation that suffering comes with being a Christian isn't so much because our nation has a First Amendment, but because the Church hasn't developed enough relationships worth suffering for. We haven't risked enough of ourselves for Christ's way in the world.

South African author Alan Paton wrote a story about a principal in Soweto, where the 1976 uprising began. The principal was a gentle guy, not controversial, not one who goes to protests. "Very much like me," said Allan Boesak, the great theologian of the South African anti-apartheid movement who reflected on Paton's

³ "Coptic Christians: Islamic State's 'Favorite Prey,'" *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/opinion/coptic-christians-islamic-states-favorite-prey.html?_r=0

⁴ "Christians in the Middle East: And Then There Were None," *The Economist*, January 2, 2016,
<http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21684795-fed-up-and-fearful-christians-are-leaving-middle-east-and-then-there-were>

book a year ago in Atlanta. He had many friends in the white community because he did not come to their tea parties to talk about politics. He was reasonable.⁵

One day the whites saw him sitting on a stage at a rally. Then the next time they saw him and he spoke at the rally. Then he was in the front leading the march. And they said to him, "What has happened to you? We depended on you! Now you are making things worse."

He responded to them: One day I will die and the Great Judge in heaven will ask me, "where are your wounds?" And I will have to say, "I don't have any." And when I say, "I don't have any," the Great Judge will say to me, "Was there then nothing to fight for?"

Which brings me back to Jesus Peraza. The nation asks things like "what policy is fair?" What's the best way to keep us safe? What's the best way to discourage illegal immigration? What's the best way to preserve jobs for Americans? You could argue that we have decided entire elections on the basis of these several questions with several more to be decided in the same way. But the Christian has to start with a different question. One that I hardly ever hear voiced by Republicans or Democrats: Who is suffering and how can I be a part of shouldering it? Who is suffering and how can I help to prevent it, alleviate it, share it? That's where we'll find God, according to the New Testament. Wherever the crosses are. Wherever the wounding is taking place. Wherever love is threatened, peace is denied, and God is mocked. That's where we'll find Jesus, if we really want to be close to him. We'll know him by his wounds and he'll want to see which ones we've taken on in his name.

The good news is that there is no shortage of opportunities to get close to those wounds. The soldiers at Walter Reed, whose injuries are a result of our too easy consent to the hell of war. They're worth fighting for. The children of Baltimore cut sharply from the Mayor's budget only months after she committed to the opposite. They're worth fighting for. The newest immigrants to our land. They're worth fighting for. People of color whose unemployment figures we have never owned, whose wealth inequality we have never truthfully faced, who still can't be certain that a walk on the street on a drive in the car won't be their last.⁶ They're worth fighting for. There are no shortage of opportunities to love even a fraction as deeply as Christ loved all people, getting close to their hurts, their grief, their anger, and their suffering.

⁵ Allen Boesak recalls the story at the NEXT Church Annual Gathering in Atlanta, 2015. I could not identify the precise story that Boesak references. Alan Paton is most well know for his critically-acclaimed novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*, published in the 1940s. He did co-write a play, *Sponono*, published just before the 1976 uprisings in Soweto. The play includes a principal character. Paton, himself, served as a principal of a school prior to writing his first novel. <http://nextchurch.net/2016-national-gathering-allan-boesak-keynote/>, mark 1:30:00.

⁶ At the writing of this sermon, a twenty-two year-old white student at the University of Maryland was being investigated for the murder of a twenty-three year-old African-American student at Bowie State. The murder was being investigated at a possible hate crime. The Bowie State student, Richard Wilbur Collins, III, had just been commissioned as an Army lieutenant. <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-college-park-monday-20170522-story.html>

In the end, Boesak told a gathering of us a year ago in Atlanta, the one who will ask you about your wounds will not be me, will not be #blacklivesmatter, will not be the women, will not be the children. It will be the one who appeared before Thomas and said to Thomas, “look at my hands and my feet and put your hand in my side.”

“I pray to God,” Boesak said, “we will have something to show.”