

## The Living Hope of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter<sup>1</sup>

It's been an intense week, full and rich for many of us.

The annual spring gathering of MCEC, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, was Friday night and Saturday in Oakville. I saw several of you there in a multitude of capacities with various responsibilities.

Thursday night I saw several of you interact with the walkers on the pilgrimage for Indigenous Rights as they came through Toronto on their arduous 600 km trek from Kitchener to Ottawa.

Yesterday was also the People's Climate March Toronto – were any of you there? Or thought about going to that?

And then I expect that many of you had full and rich weeks, attending to your work and family responsibilities, caring for your children, attending their sports and music events, helping them do their homework,

university students at all levels, you've been finishing your term papers and exams

and singers, many of you are involved this weekend in Pax Christi's performance of Elgar's *Apostles*

and on and on

What a full and rich week it has been.

This morning I want to speak into all of that with a word from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter.

I want to speak a word of Living Hope into our lives, because that's what the letter of Peter preaches.

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But I have my work cut for me because in my view 1<sup>st</sup> Peter preaches Living Hope and then demonstrates an epic fail on delivering what it preaches.

In this sermon, I want to tell you about 1<sup>st</sup> Peter by sketching the letter with a “who, what, where, when, why and how” framework, then tell you why I think Peter fails to deliver on the Living Hope that he preaches and then somewhere in this find some Living Hope anyway.

Shall we try it?

First, who, to whom was this letter written? It was written to the Jewish and Gentile Christians in exile throughout Asia minor and more specifically to young (as in new to the faith) Christians who are suffering for their faith- despised by both Jews and Gentiles who cannot understand why they would call themselves disciples of a crucified rebel from Nazareth (say where?) and even more remarkably say and believe that he rose from the dead and live by that power.

My first stumbling block when trying to apply this letter to this congregation was in response to this question of who. Who are we?

Are we suffering? Are we a minority group scattered in exile and suffering for our identity. Maybe we were in some near or distant past, but today? Generally no. When I look at this congregation, when I

consider our relative privilege in society locally and globally, then no, we are as a whole not really suffering. We certainly aren't suffering for speaking and living as Christians, so what to do with this letter. Are we suffering any number of individual woes - certainly, I'm sure I don't know half of what anyone of you may be suffering in terms of ill-health or grief or economic insecurity, or relational difficulty - all significant suffering for anyone experiencing these things. I listened to Pope Francis give a TED talk this week. The Pope is spreading his message in contemporary ways. In this talk he noted that we all suffer because everything in society is centered on money and things instead of people, but are **we** suffering for our faith as Christians like the people to whom this letter is addressed, I would have to say no, we are not.

Moving on to what:

What is Peter preaching? In the opening verses and in the text read for today he is preaching encouragement by reminding these suffers that they have experienced a new birth into a living hope by the power that raised Jesus from the dead and that they have been born anew, not of perishable but imperishable seed.

Where is he preaching it? - from the center of the faith - Jerusalem maybe? to the exiles in Asia Minor and he lists the countries to which they have scattered.

When? - at the end of the age - which reveals a certain kind of hope for the end of all things. Peter preaches an eschatology or theological belief

about how God's salvation history will come to an end and in his view it will be soon – common for 1<sup>st</sup> century writers and some people today.

Why was he preaching this to them? For encouragement. So that their faith and hope will be set on God **and** so that, “you will have genuine **mutual** love, and so that you will love one another deeply/constantly from the heart.

How is all this possible? In verse 23, 24, he says that their hope comes to them through the living and enduring word of God. “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower fails, but the word of the Lord endures forever. That word is the good news that was announced to you, for you have been born of imperishable seed into a living hope by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.”

By the living and enduring word of God – you too will live, be born into, brought into a living hope by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

When I and others receive people into baptism, we often say, “In the name of Christ and the church, I extend you my hand and bid you rise into new life by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

It is a powerful statement, a powerful hope, a living hope – made possible by the good news of the living and enduring word of God. This living and enduring word of God sustained the “living hope” in our

forebears who in fact suffered for their faith and if even unwittingly caused others to suffer in their search for a new life – but more on that later.

As promised – in what way does this powerful message in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, fail to deliver the good news promised in these powerful declarations here and in other places throughout the letter?

Because of what else is there.

The powerless, - slaves and women are told that their suffering means that they are participating in the suffering of Christ and they should cheerfully accept their lot and do right in this context – or in other words maintain the status quo

2:18 –

Slaves accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle, but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

ouch.

Why is this wrong? Why is this a fail? Why is this exhortation to suffering problematic? Because someone in power – the writer of this

letter, is telling someone who is powerless to endure for the sake of Christ, and this letter and other texts like it unwittingly legitimized all kinds of abuse throughout the centuries in Christ's name.

Frankly, this is not to be like Christ.

Christ first had power and voluntarily chose to lay down his power. The already powerless, may suffer and frequently do, but their suffering is precisely the suffering that Christ took on himself in order to alleviate it not perpetuate it. Is there comfort for those who suffer in knowing that Christ knows their suffering, of course yes, but Christ's suffering does not mean acceptance of all suffering as legitimate.

Back to the "Why?" of Peter's good news. The good news, by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead was to bring about "genuine mutual love, and so that you will love one another deeply/constantly from the heart.

Suffering comes in all kinds of forms, but woe to those who cause that suffering. Unfortunately the failure of imagination on the part of the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter and his interpreters has legitimized untold suffering over the centuries in the name of Christ.

And I haven't even addressed the words in this letter that exhort women, the weaker sex or vessel (in 3:7) to accept the authority of their husbands and to be like Sarah who obeyed Abraham and called her husband, Lord.

Or the verse that says that for the Lord's sake we are to accept the authority of every human institution and honour the emperor. Even when the emperor has no clothes?

So, what now? A letter so full of hope and promise and life and now this – frankly an epic fail. The failure of a powerful man, the author of this letter a leader of the church who did not manage to extricate himself and his vision from the oppressive system of patriarchy within which his worldview marinated.

And not to let ourselves off the hook

I venture to suggest that we are 1<sup>st</sup> Peter now. We are not primarily the ones who suffer for our faith. Most of us here are more like the author of the letter than we are like the ones to whom it was first delivered.

And examples of our own epic failures abound. We don't have to look far. They're everywhere.

From putting money and things before people – which leads to the continuation of slavery in our world – in all forms to the painful realization that the colonial story we have told ourselves – that this land is ours, that God gave us this land to put an end to the Mennonite story of suffering – that that story ignores the extent of the suffering our settlement of this land caused the indigenous who were here before us.

As we have told our own story of Living Hope to each other, we have ignored the way in which we have marinated in stories that have given

legitimacy to perpetuating the suffering of others and I do not believe that Christ would have it be so.

We are the ones who unwittingly and ignorantly caused others to suffer, still cause others to suffer. So what do we do now if we are no longer ignorant?

And so where and how does this Living Hope still live?

In light of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter and the complexity of it, in this full and rich week I began to watch for Living Hope – for real examples of it, for current day Peter’s who might recognize what they have done to others and begin to actually live the living hope that he preached not only for themselves but for others.

In the past week and a half, the following people have inspired me.

Sarah Augustine, a woman I met for the second time at the Rooted and Grounded Conference last week, is an indigenous woman originally from New Mexico, I think, who now has relative wealth and security as a North American member of Seattle Mennonite church. In 2003 she visited Suriname and saw first hand what a gold mine did to the indigenous people who lived there. She has not been the same since. She has not lived the same since. With these people’s faces and lives in her heart and mind she spends every waking moment trying to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery that made some peoples lives worth less than others and informs the bases of the laws in Europe and North America that legitimize what mining companies do to both the



earth and its indigenous inhabitants. With fear and trembling Sarah has learned how to enter halls of power – governmental and corporate - and challenge the Doctrine and its laws. When I asked her what sustains her, Sarah Augustine told me that it's the Spirit of Life that empowers her work and that helps her to not lose sight of the vision she has for the earth and all peoples of the earth. The Spirit of Life is will not be undone by the spirit and powers of death.

Another person who inspires me is Pieter Niemeyer, pastor of Rouge Valley Mennonite Church because even at great cost to himself, spiritually and emotionally, he lives and eats and breathes a narrative that attempts to give voice to LGBTQ folks who still find it hard to feel safe in the church broadly that has for so long has been the heart of oppression for people whose gender identity and sexual orientation have made them “other” and has held them outside the institutions that were supposed to care for the least of these. When I asked him how he keeps going he told me that he holds before himself a knowing that the time will come when the church will be a place of full inclusion and love for all. Pieter has a Living Hope.

On Thursday night I met Romeo Saganash – an indigenous man – a residential school survivor who is currently the member of parliament for the Quebec riding of Abitibi—Baie-James— Nunavik—Eeyou. That evening he vulnerably shared with all of us the effects of colonialism on him personally and spoke about the importance of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous persons. I was inspired at his

refusal to give up the vision, the living hope that things will not always be this way. It took us seven generations of residential schools to mess things up as badly as we have, he said, and it may take seven generations to repair the damage. 7 generations – that’s how long my ancestors have been settlers in this country. Romeo Saganash and the others that spoke on Thursday hold a vision of reconciled peoples of all nations and a truly good life where settlers acknowledge and learn from the essential goodness that Creator placed in indigenous cultures. Theirs is a living hope – expressed on Thursday night with tears.

I’m also inspired by the Living Hope of the walkers on the pilgrimage for Indigenous Rights. The age of the participants range from 11 months (she rides along in a stroller) to 87 year old Henry – who promised his son he would only walk 10 km a day (and the day I joined them he did considerably more than that.) These brave persons are praying with their feet, their very tired and sore feet, to advocate for our indigenous siblings and they are telling anyone who will listen to them that if we make the United Nations Declaration of Rights for indigenous persons into law through bill C-262, that would change things as fundamentally as guaranteed clean water for all 1<sup>st</sup> nations in Canada and give a time line for the implementation of all 46 articles of the Declaration.

And finally, I want to say that Pope Francis, the one who sits in the seat of Peter today, inspires me. Pope Francis comes from a family of poor migrants to Argentina.

In the TED talk that I mentioned earlier he reminds us that: our lives

are fundamentally about our relationships with each other and the earth. That even though we all suffer when we put money and things before people, ultimately no system can nullify our desire to open up to the good and to act from our hearts, out of compassion. “Each and every one of us can become a bright candle, a reminder that light will overcome darkness, and never the other way around,”

“Feeling hopeful does not mean to be optimistically naïve and ignore the tragedy humanity is facing,” he says, “Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn’t lock itself into darkness, that doesn’t dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow.” And as he says all this he calls for a revolution of tenderness.

There are at least two things that each of the above persons has in common, they’ve all suffered or can identify with those who have, and they refuse to stay there. Their living hope has inspired them to use what power and privilege they do have great or small to live into a vision where Hope and the Spirit of Life over death prevails.

Will you be a Peter, will I be a Peter, will all of us in this room acknowledge, not only our suffering if we have it, but also the power and privilege we have and dedicate all that we have and all that we are to genuine mutual love made possible by the Living hope of the Living Christ? May it be so.