

5-3-2020 SERMON CCI I Peter 1: 3-9 Reading the Will

Old movies and novels used to have these dramatic scenes of family members gathered in the lawyer's office to hear the reading of the will. The family all gathered and waited to hear their name called and what inheritance they got. Some never heard their name called, while others got everything. And then the infighting began. It made for excitement in a movie, but it could be a terrible reality.

Reading the will in a lawyer's office doesn't happen anymore. We're more modern today. We have community property laws, pre-nuptial agreements, and trusts that define inheritances along with wills. Many of us provide our adult children with copies of our wills. My parents did this long ago, and our daughter has copies of our wills too.

According to the Old Testament, in ancient Israel, our daughter would not receive an inheritance. Widows and daughters did not inherit anything. Inheritances went to the males in the family. If there were no sons, most inheritances passed over the daughters and went to the brothers of the deceased. This sounds strange and unfair to us, but it was the way of the world at that time.

A lot has changed since then, but one thing still remains: The person who signs a will determines who gets what based on that person's latest love, hate, or whim. Wills can be changed at any time with a phone call and a pen. They can be changed over and over. Haven't we all heard stories of people who used their will as a bargaining chip to get kids to kowtow, or as a weapon in anger- leaving an heir nothing but their dirty socks or leaving everything to the cat. Many a family has been divided by the whims of a will that favored some and excluded others.

And so we come to our scripture reading for today where the Apostle Peter describes the inheritance of the people of God in a letter written to be circulated among the small churches scattered throughout what we now call Turkey. Many scholars believe this letter was written to be read at the time of the baptism of new believers in Christ. So imagine the members and new believers in those small churches sitting together,

perhaps in a home like us, listening to Peter's letter being read during worship on a Sunday morning. These were Christians who were shunned by society because they believed in Jesus instead of the popular gods. We know there were women and slaves sitting there with the men because Peter wrote to them in other parts of this letter. They were all part of the world's excluded nobodies, who had been given new birth into God's family by their faith in Jesus, and a living hope because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. All sitting together as family, listening to the reading of the will. What will God do with his inheritance?

Let's try to hear Peter's words like they did. ⁴ "You have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." What did that mean to women and slaves who never had had the chance of an inheritance? What did it mean to the men who had to share that inheritance with them? To put this in today's language: "You have an inheritance that is being guarded in heaven, and nobody can change the will. The value will not go up or down based on the stock market. No one can lie to disinherit you or say "your kind" isn't welcome around here. Your inheritance can't burn down; it's imperishable. All because of grace." No wonder Peter wrote that they could be filled with joy because nothing could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing. That inheritance includes us too, friends.

In light of our inheritance, Peter says our trials take on a different perspective: ⁶ *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.* ⁷ *These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.* If I didn't know better, I'd think Peter wrote this just for us living during the trials of Covid 19. Think of the trials. We've had days of discouragement, loneliness, worries,

some have been laid off, others are working essential jobs putting themselves at risk (and we thank God for them), others are caring for spouses or parents as they decline, some are walking the journey of grief, roofs are leaking and no money to pay. All kinds of trials that test our faith.

Rejoice in all this? My first response to trials is **not**, “O, thank you, Jesus!” It’s more like, “Why do I deserve this?” But Peter wants us to understand that trials are not to be avoided. If we let them, trials do something important: they prove the genuineness of our faith. The word prove means “to test something to prove it won’t fail. As a nursing professor, I tested all my students so they could prove they were capable of providing skilled and knowledgeable care for patients. We do the same with medical school graduates. No one wants a nurse or a doctor who has not been tested. Especially at a time like this.

Testing is like refining gold. If you heat raw gold ore until it’s liquefied, the impurities can be skimmed off the top, leaving only the pure gold. That’s what God does through trials when we let him. He allows us to be in the fire to burn off our impurities- our tendency to live for ourselves rather than the kingdom, to burn off greed, impatience, self-importance, worrying, our desire to control, so that what is left is genuine faith. Martin Luther said that temptation and adversity were the two best books in his library.¹ We learn real faith through being tested.

In 2008 this truth became real for me. I traveled to Kenya as a nurse to teach elementary students in poor rural schools how to brush their teeth and to assess their teeth to make recommendations for which students should see the dentist on his next visit. The days were long-walking to the schools in early morning, setting up my little clinic, assessing and teaching students all day, walking home, barely sleeping on a mattress on the floor. The first Sunday I preached with an interpreter at a large church in Nairobi, scared to death all the way to the church, and was stunned when 25 people came forward for prayer afterwards; 5

¹ Martin Luther, Sermon for the Troubled, Psalm 88:7.

people gave their lives to Christ. God had given me the courage to step up on that stage and share his Word. I actually enjoyed it! But on the 10th morning, I was setting up my clinic and I was so, so tired. So much poverty, so much need, so little sleep. As I looked out the window, I noticed 2 dogs sleeping happily in the shade, and I began to cry, praying for the Lord to help me because I didn't have the energy to face the day. But the first students began to arrive, so I wiped my eyes and greeted them as cheerfully as I could, and immediately found the strength I needed just when I needed it. God is so faithful. That trip tested my faith, and I know without a doubt that my time in Kenya deepened and stretched my faith in ways that never would have happened here in comfortable America. That's what Peter was saying - God uses trials to refine our faith.

When we take that perspective, we can joyfully sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness and O How I Love Jesus," even during a coronavirus pandemic. Because we know God is with us through it all, refining our faith, and we know that when we leave this life, we have an amazing inheritance waiting for us, that will make any trial pale in comparison. We can say with those Christians Peter wrote to, "Though we have not seen Jesus, we believe in him and love him with all our hearts."

PRAYER Heavenly Father, you know we're living in difficult days, days that seem to go on forever. We thank you for your presence with us, for your faithfulness always, and for the inheritance waiting for us. Forgive us when our trust in your goodness falters. Help us be willing to let you refine our faith in the fire of trials, to let you teach us, rather than long for deliverance. May we bring your light and joy to those around us this week.