

Sermon Notes: For the good of all...
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If with heart and soul you're doing good, do you think you can be stopped?

These are the opening words from this morning's reading of 1 Peter 3:13.

It seems to me that people who have their heart and soul *into doing good*...deep inside –*really believe that*.

But what about when two groups who believe in heart and soul they are doing good – oppose one another?

In the history of this country, no tragedy underscores this good vs. good belief carried to bellum more than the Civil War of 1861 – 1865.

In that war, Eleven Southern States declared their secession from the United States of America and formed the Confederate States of America.

The U.S. Federal Government was supported by twenty northern states and five states that bordered the South. These twenty-five were known as the Union States.

Eleven v. Twenty-five.

All believed in their hearts and souls that they were doing good – being righteous. Fighting for their good way of life. And so they fought each other's goodness, in a way, and paid with 620,000 soldier deaths and an unknown number of civilian casualties. It remains the deadliest and bloodiest war in American History. Ten percent of all Northern males between the ages of 20 – 45 died; as did 30% of all Southern males aged 18 – 40. Women and children were fighting, too. Statistics back then, as too often still now, didn't always record information for other than males.

And when it was over...well, the Reconstruction of the United States of America began – and still continues today: 146 years later.

The difficulty of living together, sharing a nation when opposing points-of-view come face-to-face – continues today.

On this Memorial Day Weekend, we remember the losses of all those and their families who have ever served or serve now, and we hold them in prayer and gratitude for their sacrifices – **and** we remember that we still haven't quite figured how to get along.

We have to remember that, too.

So what on earth was Peter thinking about?

"If with heart and soul you're doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you're still better off."

That's a preacher talking. Peter's a preacher. In the hymn: "There is a Balm in Gilead" – it says just that: "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul..."

And he's preaching. But who's listening? Who's remembering?

Following wars, what is one of the first things you do?

Right, you honor the fallen, forgotten, those lost. We **memorialize**: we do our best to **preserve the memory** of those we do not want to forget, lest we take our lives for granted and repeat the mistakes of the past – at terrible unnecessary expense.

The unacceptable cost of inhumanity to one another.

Let our prayer be that war will be no more.

If warring worked – there would be no more wars.

When and if there are such things as "just" wars is a topic for another day. It is a reflection. The work of peace cannot rely on the scourges of war, nor should they be acceptable as collateral damage in pursuit of a higher goal.

The work of today is to end wars.

Peter once more:

If with heart and should you're doing good, do you think you can be stopped. Even if you suffer for it, you're still better off. Don't give the opposition a second thought; keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ – the one who is Lord."

I have known something for quite a while. There is little benefit in long debates about Bible passages. That may be because it was never meant as a source of proving oneself right over other interpretations. Debates, arguments, studies of

the Bible – have never produced sweeping agreement across all divisions. They have only dug more deeply into the cement of ideology.

We are not ideologies – we are people, sisters and brothers...working at understanding one another is what changes things. That is the core of the teachings of Jesus, and it begins with understanding that ***we are all loved*** by God.

Debate cares less about that. Ultimately the purpose off any debate is to diminish one side to lift up the other. To win. Not to understand.

One would think that church folk would be better at understanding than secular establishment folk. After all, that is the message of Peter: “keeping hearts at attention before Christ.” And, when this happens, often in smaller settings where the cost of acceptance doesn’t threaten the *raison d’être* of the institutions involved, amazing things happen; miraculous things happen. And, usually, they are things that eliminate or begin to eliminate things, situations, conditions that should never have been in the first place.

It has been a struggle since the beginning, seemingly from the first day of life outside of the *Garden*, we have been in a quest for reconciliation and reconstruction that has too often been more about being right and *lording* over others.

I know about people trying to impose their sense of good and right when it is the opposite of what is good and right for others.

For the last fifteen years of my life as a Presbyterian, I have been part of a church community that I love. In that expansive community of more than 2 million members and 11,000 churches, I have also been one of those marginalized and vilified by the practice of the PC (USA) in excluding people who were LGBT/Q from the full work and worship of the church. An amendment inserted into the Constitution of the church in 1997, effectively shut the door – slammed the door – on the ordination of people who were LGBT/Q, with very few exceptions.

Some of us, somehow, made it through. We were in presbyteries where welcoming was offered to gay folk, in spite of charges often brought against the ordaining bodies and the individuals involved. Still there continued to be those who believed the church could be better, more inclusive, broadly open to the spirit and God’s great and diverse creation of God’s children and kept the faith, trying to change the church. ***Imagine!***

We challenged those in opposition, we brought legislation year after year to remove the offensive and violent amendment of exclusion; yet, we never sought to exclude others to be included. We never fought to “put others down” to raise ourselves up. We never judged “our doing good” better than “*their* doing good.”

We kept our hearts at attention to Christ and to a vision of the church as we believed it was always meant to be – inclusive, radically gracious, wildly hospitable.

We never saw ourselves as *issues* but as living breathing children of God; and we never believed it was we who were dividing the church. It was an amendment that did that – and it had to go so we could begin to heal, reconcile, and reconstruct.

The amendment did go, earlier this month (May) when the Presbytery of Twin Cities voted “yes” to the ratification of Amendment 10A, tipping the balance for change with the majority vote. The new amendment will replace the language that was used to exclude gay people.

Even though a new language is in place, it doesn’t require anyone to do anything. It offers presbyteries the way to ordain qualified candidates for office and leadership in the PC (USA). And, it doesn’t call for a division. It calls for a way forward where we can live as a church with one another, with our differences, and with respect and protection of one another in faithful paths within the church.

As you might imagine, not everyone sees it that way. There are those now mobilizing their lament of a lost church in all sorts of ways. There are those whose “good” means that theirs is the only “good,” with no willingness to see sisters and brothers who are gay as ever being accepted by them.

The vote did not immediately change the hearts of those who were in opposition, any more than the end of the Civil War changed the hearts of those who days before were sighting each other over rifles and lead bullets, propelled by black powder – both standing on the land of their own country.

Like the Civil War, the Amendment in our Constitution that excluded others was wrong long before it ended or was voted out of existence. And like all conflicts, one of the very first things we at the end of each struggle was to remember the names of people who had worked so hard for the change; we memorialized those who had died long before they knew their efforts succeeded – or were forced out of the church, shaking the dust from their sandals. We remembered the wounded, the soul-sick, remembered them as we should, so they would not be forgotten and so that one day, maybe, we avoid doing such things to one another – ever again, whether in the name of country – or God – or anything else..

If with heart and soul you’re doing good, do you think you can be stopped. Even if you suffer for it, you’re still better off. Don’t give the opposition a second thought; keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ – the one who is Lord. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when

people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They'll end up realizing that they're the ones who need a bath."

Fortitude, forbearance, faithfulness...can we see these things in all people who hold with their heart and soul that John's message of today's Gospel reading is greater than our interpretations or strong-arms?

"If you love me," says Jesus, "show it by doing what I've told you."

For that, I refer us all to Matthew 22:36-40

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"
Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

May we honor the memory of others by living these words one and all...together.

That may just be the entrance to the *garden*, fiery cherubim – stepped aside.

Amen