

4 Therefore, since Christ suffered as a human, you should also arm yourselves with his way of thinking. This is because whoever suffers is finished with sin. 2 As a result, they don't live the rest of their human lives in ways determined by human desires but in ways determined by God's will. 3 You have wasted enough time doing what unbelievers desire—living in their unrestrained immorality and lust, their drunkenness and excessive feasting and wild parties, and their forbidden worship of idols. 4 They think it's strange that you don't join in these activities with the same flood of unrestrained wickedness. So they slander you. 5 They will have to reckon with the one who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 Indeed, this is the reason the good news was also preached to the dead. This happened so that, although they were judged as humans according to human standards, they could live by the Spirit according to divine standards.

7 The end of everything has come. Therefore, be self-controlled and clearheaded so you can pray. 8 Above all, show sincere love to each other, because love brings about the forgiveness of many sins. 9 Open your homes to each other without complaining. 10 And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts. 11 Whoever speaks should do so as those who speak God's word. Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes. Do this so that in everything God may be honored through Jesus Christ. To him be honor and power forever and always. Amen.

12 Dear friends, don't be surprised about the fiery trials that have come among you to test you. These are not strange happenings. 13 Instead, rejoice as you share Christ's suffering. You share his suffering now so that you may also have overwhelming joy when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are mocked because of Christ's name, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory—indeed, the Spirit of God—rests on you.

15 Now none of you should suffer as a murderer or thief or evildoer or rebel. 16 But don't be ashamed if you suffer as one who belongs to Christ. Rather, honor God as you bear Christ's name. Give honor to God, 17 because it's time for judgment to begin with God's own household. But if judgment starts with us, what will happen to those who refuse to believe God's good news? 18 If the righteous are barely rescued, what will happen to the godless and sinful? 19 So then, those who suffer because they follow God's will should commit their lives to a trustworthy creator by doing what is right.

- Common English Bible

I think we've been praying about deepening division and distrust and polarization in our nation since the day I arrived as your pastor five years ago. I know I've been praying about it through all 20 years of my ordained ministry, and to some degree throughout all 46 years of my life. Things happen like Charlottesville, like George Floyd, like protests over mask and vaccine mandates, like the overturning of Roe and with each event we think, "It can't get worse than this." And then it does. People who used to

enjoy table fellowship now shun each other. People who used to serve side by side find themselves in shouting matches. The large scale division in our society is a crack in the social fabric that is felt all the way into the smallest communities, individual congregations and families. I have heard testimony recently to the difficulty of sustaining civil conversations at family reunions. I know of moments in our own fellowship when long held bonds of affection have been broken. I heard that the small town in which I began my ministry 20 years ago was nearly ripped apart by different understandings of how COVID should be managed. This is a town of 4,000 people in a county with 25,000 people. Many of the residents are related. All conflicts feel deeply personal, and are deeply painful.

I suppose it is possible that some are taking positions on opposite sides of our culture wars and don't find the battle painful. They find it invigorating. They are pursuing principles and values that are a matter of life and death; no matter what side they are on they bring this perspective and passion to it. Everyone knows that they are right and someone else is wrong. But that math doesn't quite work.

I think that though many of us are aligned on one side or another of culture wars, we are distressed by the loss of nuance, the inability to sustain dialogue across difference, the crumbling of relationships and connections. I'd like to think that this is because the Spirit of God lives in us and the work of the Spirit is connection and transformation and life and all the vitriol of our society is quite another and incompatible spirit. When we are seeking to love no matter what, failures in love, and barriers to love are upsetting.

We picked up reading 1 Peter where we left off last week. We hear at last what was the source of some of the slander that the churches to whom the letter was written were enduring. They are no longer participating in the excesses of their surrounding society — life without limits or boundaries— and they seem strange. They are mocked for their temperance. It reminded me of the experience that some people have when they begin a process of recovery from addiction. When, by the grace of God, they are enabled to put down the substance or behavior that used to have control over them, others who are in the grips of that substance or behavior think them strange and may try to pull them back

in. “Aw come on, just one drink, bite...” “Don’t be such a prude.” It takes connection to a supportive community to maintain one’s sobriety or abstinence or recovery the face of such pressures.

And I think in our society drunk on distrust and disrespect, setting no limits to destructive behavior and communication, when we choose to love everybody, to refrain from defensive attacks, we are just as vulnerable to judgment and scorn. But we are able to do this, to love everybody, to welcome strangers to our table, to witness to our values and commitments without tearing others down because we know that we worship the God who has overcome all estrangement and suffering, letting life prevail. Things looked bad on Good Friday. It looked like evil had won. But on Easter it became apparent that God, the source of all good, reigns. It can certainly look like evil reigns in our sojourn on earth, but we know that God reigns; this is our hope. And this is the foundation for living differently.

This different life looks like sincere love that facilitates forgiveness, like welcoming strangers, like letting all our speech be edifying, like using the gifts we have received to serve neighbors. The clause about hospitality in this passage has a word in it that literally translates to “Love strangers.” Or “Be friendly to strangers.” As two scholars write “The church was already a multicultural community, uniting in Christ people from various economic, linguistic, racial, and national backgrounds. The church needed to provide for traveling missionaries and other Christians who needed support and shelter. Old prejudices die hard, and the church is reminded that love is a matter of concrete acts for the benefit of others who may be different; cultural xenophobia is overcome in the Christian community.” The roots of cultural xenophobia are deep in our society. But the power to love, rather than fear strangers, is deep in our hearts.

I shared in the e-news on Thursday that I am inviting Eileen Mejia to teach an eight week series of Saturday workshops at St. A’s this October and November on building compassionate community. I know this is a significant time investment, but I trust that several of you will be led by God’s Spirit to participate so that you might be vessels of love and transformation for your families, your church, and your other communities. This is what it means to belong to God in Christ and be bearers of the

Spirit. Let's keep living into our vision of forging meaningful connections and working to bridge differences between people.

I hope that when people meet the kindred of St. A's they will find us strange. And that our strangeness would be a catalyst of change.

Sources in addition to scripture that were cited in or influenced the writing of this sermon:

M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock. *The People's New Testament Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009.

Shively Smith. "Commentary on 1 Peter 4:1-19" at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-1-peter-4-of-5/commentary-on-1-peter-13-23-4>