

We turn now to our second Scripture which is a reading from 1st Peter. Peter is one of the original 12 disciples that we may know as Simon Peter. Many scholars think that this letter was actually penned by a person after Peter's death writing in Peter's name. No matter when it was written or by whom it is addressed to Christians facing persecution.

The letter is written to Christians who once participated as normal members of the society but since their conversion to Christianity they have become marginalized and abused. The society to which they once belonged now considers them unwelcome and dangerous. This letter which we are about to read from offers words of support and encouragement while these Christians face persecution for their beliefs.

Read I Peter 4:12-19

This weekend is Memorial Day weekend when we are invited to remember and celebrate the men and women who gave of their lives in service for our country. Some of us have been privileged to visit memorials in Washington, DC and elsewhere which testify to sacrifices made by soldiers in wars such as World War I, II, Korea, and Vietnam as well as recent wars in the Middle East. We all know that some wars are more accepted than other wars.

Kerry Patterson tells about his experience of being drafted in 1969. That, of course, was the height of the Vietnam War, a very unpopular military conflict whose wounds are still felt today. Kerry was very relieved, however, when he was assigned to the Coast Guard serving in San Francisco Bay. It was a plush assignment compared to the ones chosen to fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Kerry tells about how when the soldiers left base they made sure to not wear their uniforms. A soldier in the civilian culture in 1970 faced ridicule. One day, however, Patterson needed to go to the library and did not have time to change out of his uniform. As he walked through town he was met with uncomfortable stares and as he entered the library a man spit on him. Ridicule and persecution.

Peter writes to Christians facing persecution for being Christians. Most of us if not all of us don't know what that is like. Christians in the United States actually have it pretty easy. My children attend a public school where Christian songs are regularly sung by students at school functions.

None of us know what it is like to be targeted and killed like the 23 Coptic Christians in Egypt which just happened 2 days ago. In two weeks we will get to hear in worship Rev. Peter Breeze share what it was like for him to face persecution and become a refugee in his native Africa.

None of us know what it is like to be Xavier Gonzalez, a church planter working in one of Colombia's most dangerous regions in South America: a poor, rural area currently ruled by paramilitaries. Paramilitaries are, of course, armies that arise in different regions of the country to protect the very powerful drug lords.

Before he moved into ministry, Xavier, not his real name, had a successful career in broadcasting. But in 2009, he felt led by God to begin a church in one of Colombia's poorest cities. Even his coworkers warned him, saying, "That's a violent place. There are paramilitaries there, and they are going to kill you."

But Xavier couldn't deny the call from God in his life. "God gave me an order and I have to go," he told his co-workers. "Even if I have to die for Jesus, I will go."

In the 12 years since he yielded to the call, Xavier says God has protected him through everything. He's been threatened by paramilitary members, rebels against the government, and street gangs. His wife was robbed at gunpoint, and the robbers told her, "If you see us again, pretend you've never seen us before. If not, we'll kill you."

Near the beginning of his ministry, a rebel told him the reason why the armed groups fighting against the government hate Christians. The man told Xavier, "My boss hates Christians because Christians make people not want to join our ranks."

And though he and his church of about 130 are hated, they choose to offer love to their enemies. “We preach about love and forgiving others and our opponents don’t want to forgive. They don’t want love and forgiveness to be preached... But we treat them well. We give them food, we give our enemies soda and we serve them in any way we can,” Xavier says.

Though the threats are constant, the actions of the Christians are making a difference. One believer was summoned to meet the paramilitaries, which almost always means you’ll be killed. He said goodbye to his wife, and the church began to pray for him. When he reached the paramilitary camp deep in the jungle, the Christian was greeted by a tall woman. The Christian man shook her hand firmly to show that he wasn’t afraid.

“How can I help you?” he asked the woman. She looked surprised. “What do you mean? Everyone who comes here wants something from me.”

“I can help you,” he said, “because I know that God can do things in your life.” The woman began to cry. “That’s why I asked for you,” she said. She revealed she had cancer and asked for prayer. The Christian man prayed for her and headed home.

Three months later the paramilitary woman called him to tell him the cancer was gone. The strength of the church members’ testimonies and interactions like this have given Xavier and the other believers a measure of respect in the community, but the danger remains constant.

Though recent news from Colombia is all about a peace process between the government and the rebels, in Xavier’s area, nothing has changed. Their hope is not in a government-negotiated peace process. As Xavier says, “We are putting our hope in the lasting peace that only God can give.”

So can we who live in this country connect with Peter’s words written to Christians facing persecution? That’s a good question. None of us faced death threats to come to worship today. None of us will be given a strange stare if we have a conversation in a public place about our faith.

None of us will be the target of any discrimination if we put a bumper sticker on our car that proclaims that we attend this church. None of us need to worry if we post a comment on Facebook or Twitter that we attended worship today. For those of us in South Carolina every person we elect to serve in public office at least claims to be a Christian.

So what does this text have to teach us? I'm not sure the text says this but I wonder if those of us who are in Christian in the US need to worry less about finding persecution against us here and acknowledging the very real persecution faced by Christians elsewhere.

Because sometimes texts of Scripture are not about us but about other people. So we allow for space in our world for stories like Xavier and Peter Breeze. Sometimes it's not about us but about the very real persecution faced by others.

I found Xavier's story from an organization called "The Voice of the Martyrs" who publish a website at www.persecution.com. There is another group which uses the website www.persecution.org. Each site gives testimony to Christians who face real persecution for their faith.

What these stories and these words from 1st Peter teach us, I think, is that being truly faithful to God may lead to persecution. But Peter warns that our persecution should come from seeking to do what is right. Not persecution from being a criminal or engaging in mischief but persecution which comes from being faithful to God's will.

And sometimes if we stand up for what is right we will face ridicule in our culture here in the US. Anytime a Christian stands up for someone who is facing persecution in our culture you can expect to hear voices opposing you. If you speak out in solidarity with the powerless in our culture against the wishes of those in power you will face some semblance of persecution.

I certainly hear those voices whenever I am engaged in events with members of the Muslim community.

On this Memorial Day weekend we are invited to remember those who died while serving this country.

But these Scriptures invite us to remember those who have really suffered for their Christian faith and to be inspired by them to be faithful in our life.

God is faithful to us and invites us to be faithful to God no matter what the cost. AMEN.

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-Given: May 28, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

-https://www.persecution.com/public/newsroom.aspx?story_ID=%3d383536&featuredstory_ID=%3d353838

-Patterson, Kerry, Vital Smarts e-newsletter, Vol. 15, Issue 21