



Roanoke, Virginia

May 24, 2020

## *“Join Your Struggle to His”*

*I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11*

**George C. Anderson**

<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. <sup>7</sup> Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup> Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup> To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Are you tired of talking about Covid-19 and the Pandemic?

OK, let’s talk sports. (I can hear the groans from a few of you even from your dens and living rooms. I don’t do this often so hang with me).

Let’s be clear, even sports fans would rather *watch* sports than *talk* about it. But right now, what sports are there to watch? I saw a nationally broadcast *Cornhole championship*. I was amazed by the skill of the two masked contestants tossing those beanbags right where they wanted them. I don’t know who he is or what he looks like, but I started rooting for Red Mask to win. I was



equally amazed that two commentators had so much to say about bag positioning and wrist flips. Still, a nationally televised cornhole event?

I don't watch car races as a rule, but I did watch a NASCAR race for a little while the other day. Well... not really. What I watched was iRacing. This is where professional drivers, spread around the world, sit behind the wheel of a console rather than the wheel of a car and compete in a virtual race. As I watched these realistic-but-not-real cars flying around a virtual track with frozen figures in the stands, I felt like I was looking over the shoulder of my nephew, Chris, playing a video game. And that is about as long as I spent watching this race.

Is that sports in the age of a pandemic?

Or is this sports in a pandemic? For weeks, millions have been watching a sports series. You would think it was the NBA playoff series because after each event, journalists have written about it and SportsCenter has reported on it; telling what happened, following up with human interest stories, focusing on rivalries, and having debates about issues surrounding it.

The ten episodes of *The Last Dance*, which aired over five weeks, used the lens of the 1997–98 Chicago Bulls season to look at the entire Bulls dynasty and its players and coaches. Really, the series was about Michael Jordan, and since I was a huge Michael Jordan fan, I gave this non-sports sporting event my undivided attention. I was most fascinated when Jordan was interviewed because I wanted to understand what drove him to become the best player to play the game and how he inspired, pushed and bullied the players around him to meet his high standards. Jordan's whole focus is on winning... wining anything—basketball games, golf matches, coin flips, cards, smack talk... And it was obvious that he would say or do whatever was necessary to win.

But though as a fan I hung on every word, you won't hear me quote him often in sermons.

- Aside from the fact that I do avoid using too many sports illustrations in sermons,
- and aside from his frequent profanity,

his vision of winning is not mine. I'm a competitive guy—just ask the Bingham and Jamisons what I sing when I win a card game—but at the end of the day, and certainly in the pulpit, my focus is on how to win in life.

When I quote a basketball great—the few times I allow myself to do that—it will probably not be the greatest player to play the game but the greatest coach to coach the game.

- No, not Dean Smith.
- **No**, not Coach K.
- No, not any NBA coach who, to succeed, has to be more manager than coach.

I am talking about the coach whose teams won ten national championships in 12 years: John Wooden, the coach of the UCLA Bruins.

There is so much I love about Wooden. He was

- an English major (I wish I had been one),
- a deep thinker and deep reader,



- someone with a profound Christian faith,
- a coach who found a way to motivate teams to win without using profanity or allowing his players to,
- and a coach whose highest priority was to be a mentor in life for those who looked up to him.

How one lives and how one treats others were far more important to Wooden than winning basketball games. And because winning in life was his highest priority, frequently what he taught his players went beyond Pauley’s Pavilion to how the players would live outside of basketball.

You have heard one of his quotes in a non-sports context. Here’s one:

“Those who fail to prepare are preparing to fail.”<sup>1</sup>

How about this:

“If you don’t have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over again?”

And I like this one, especially in thinking about social distancing and wearing masks:

“Consider the rights of others before your own feelings, and the feelings of others before your own rights.”

And then there is one. It is something

- that Wooden would have said to a player playing hard but not thinking,
- or something that might be said by a supervisor to a worker,
- or might be said of a committee consumed with busy work:

“Never confuse effort with achievement.”

There is a difference, you see, between *productive effort* and *wasted effort*.

I would suggest that there is also a difference between *productive struggle* and *wasted struggle*.

Struggle is often talked about as a virtue in and of itself. It is true that without struggle there is no growth, no learning, no change. Culturally we get pep talks about this all the time. How’s this for a wall poster: “The depth of your struggle determines the height of your success.”<sup>2</sup> That quote is less inspirational when you learn why the one who said it, the R&B artist R. Kelly, is serving prison time. “Success,” wasn’t measured by him by the way others are treated.

So, how about this one from F. Scott Fitzgerald: “The redeeming things are not happiness and pleasure but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle.”?

---

<sup>1</sup> My wife, Millie, reminded me after I preached that Wooden was not the first to say this. This quote has been attributed to different people with the earliest recorded instance being in 1919 dating back to an article written by Rev. H.K. Williams for the periodical, *The Biblical Word*. He was probably quoting an aphorism that some say began with Benjamin Franklin (with no recorded evidence).

<sup>2</sup> I don’t know if the quote originated with the rapper R. Kelly, but he said it.



Or let's quote the Bible. "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed."

That last quote came from our passage in I Peter.

(By the way, now that I'm going to start talking about our passage, I'm going to stick with tradition and name the author as the Apostle Peter, even though that could well not be the case).

I think that the entire passage, the entire letter that is I Peter, is misunderstood if we think that Peter is simply saying that struggle, on its own, is a virtue. Let me be stark just to make my point.

- Grinding poverty is a struggle. Yes, some emerge from poverty the stronger and better for having endured and persevered, but it has also destroyed lives.
- Addiction is a struggle. Yes, some in recovery are among the wisest people you will meet for their having faced their addictions and grown as a result, but addiction has destroyed many addicts and their loved ones.
- Yes, the Great Depression was a national struggle, and we can say that the best of the Greatest Generation gave so much to building communities because they emerged from the depression with a resolve to improve their lives and the lives of others, but with just a little bit of research you will find out how many bodies and spirits were broken because the struggle was too much.

To read I and II Peter, you would know that the Christian community of faith to which the letters are written are persecuted. Our passage begins by talking about the "fiery trials" the community has had to endure. The word translated as "trials," "πειρασμὸν" can be translated as "sufferings," and can also be translated as "persecutions." Our passage also tells of "lions" on the prowl. Enough Christians had been thrown to the lions in the Roman Colosseum that "Lions" had become a pretty strong metaphor for social forces that are predatory toward Christians.

But before jumping to the conclusion that Peter is encouraging his readers to be ready to be literally burned at the stake or thrown to the lions—and then jumping to the conclusion that Peter is pumping them up to be martyred—consider the evidence of the letters.

The unique struggles of the community to which Peter writes comes because of their being "a community of aliens." Peter was a bit hyperbolic in speaking of fiery trials and lions because most of the persecution they receive isn't physical attack but prejudice resulting in verbal abuse. Because they are a community devoted to remembering the words and repeating the actions of Jesus, their worship, their ethics, their priorities don't line up with any other religion, fad or political party. Jews harass them because the community includes Gentiles and Samaritans and even some Romans. Romans harass them because the community includes Jews.

Peter would say that their struggles, on their own, without purpose or without the right response, can be **destructive** **debilitating**, **discouraging**, **defeating**, **deflating**, **demeaning**, **dehumanizing**... I could come up with some more words that begin with a "D," but let's just say that struggle that is only endured and doesn't lead anywhere deserves not a D but an "F." It leads to victimizing, complaining, blaming, and violence.



Peter wants none of that that.

In response,

- he doesn't say struggle is a part of life, even though that is certainly true.
- he doesn't go to the extreme of saying that it is better to die a Christian than live as a Jew, Gentile, Roman, pagan or coward.

No, what Peter says is as helpful for us to hear today in our context as it was for the community to hear in theirs. Peter is not asking his readers to see their struggle as a gift from God, but rather in the midst of whatever struggle that comes *to remember the gifts of God's love, grace and community*. When you *must* struggle, join your struggle to that of Jesus. Remember who you are, especially in struggle or crisis, because people are watching closer than ever to see who people really are. Are you kind in what you say or do? Or are you cruel? Do you sacrifice to unite, or do you flee or attack in fear or anger?

Earlier in his letter Peter described Jesus's struggles. Whether the struggle was imposed on Jesus or because he chose it.

- He struggled because he loved—and he made sacrifices for those he loved.
- He struggled because he stood up for others who had little voice or standing on their own.
- He struggled because he welcomed into his company those who others demonized and shunned.
- He struggled because he put himself at risk to heal lepers, and because he opened himself to criticism and even attack for speaking his truth.
- He struggled for the same reasons he lived:
  - to honor God's name,
  - to live out his identity as God's Son,
  - to love as he had been loved.

And it was all worth it because he was being authentic to himself as a child of God and obedient to God's claim on his life.

So, what about this pandemic? I don't want to say that this pandemic is a gift... unless we find a way to make it one. I wish we didn't have to deal with it, I never thought in my lifetime we would have to, I think a lot of suffering will come of it, and I want it to go away.

I think Peter would respond by saying, "Well, it is here. How are you going to respond?"

- Will you try simply to survive it and not grow?
- Will you use it to lash out at those you don't understand, participating in the partisan blame games and give a Jordan focus to winning, whatever it takes?
- Or will you join your struggle to that of Jesus and find a way to win in life by being a blessing in the world?"



Peter would ask these questions of us individuals who are able to use this time of staying mostly at home to get some rest, give attention to our families, work on our hobbies and get our priorities right—to learn to grow into the advice of Wendell Berry: “Slow down. Pay attention. Do good work. Love your neighbors. Love your place. Stay in your place. Settle for less, enjoy it more.”<sup>3</sup>

But Peter also asks the question of us as a community. He would have us remember those who have to work at some greater risk so we can have food on our tables and goods shipped to our homes, the poor who have no work and financial means to enjoy the break, and those anxious about losing their jobs. He would remind us that the world is watching to see if while taking care of ourselves we are taking care of others... watching to see if we are following the bad example of others or setting a good example for others. Are we bearing a witness of a better way of living responsibly, showing respect, and pulling together to get through this together?

So, if anyone wants to say that this pandemic is the best thing that ever happened to us, forgive me if I don't say “Amen.” But if someone were to say that by joining our struggles to Jesus we can be a part of good and gracious and beautiful things, then I *will* say, “Amen.”

I think that it is God's will that we make that kind of witness and I'll join you in praying that God's will be done.

---

<sup>3</sup> As summarized by Paul Kingsnorth in his introduction to “The World-Ending Fire,” an anthology of Berry's writings edited by him.

