

1 Peter 2:2-3: If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.

Wow, that reading from Peter this morning is a downer, isn't it? Do the wrong thing, and get punished? As my grandchildren say, Well, duh! But do the right thing, and still suffer? How can that be? Let's start by looking at what we might mean by "doing right." What is the right thing to do?

As Christians, we've been given a pretty clear road map. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In Jesus' day, the idea of neighbor was one who lived within a very short distance, perhaps only an hour's walk away. Maybe a 30-minute donkey ride. Maybe not even that far. Neighbors made up one's community.

Today, the concept of neighbor has been expanded. For in today's world there are few neighbors we have not seen. We are bombarded daily with TV reports from remote regions of the world. We see people in Zimbabwe struggling with 80% unemployment, 100,000% inflation, and a dictator determined to hold onto power regardless. We see Tibetans protesting against Chinese intrusions and the French demonstrating against the Chinese actions in Tibet. We see refugees in Darfur, and AIDS orphans in Honduras. We sometimes feel that we have crept into the homes of people from around the globe. Our community has expanded to include neighbors from far away.

But do we love these new neighbors? Do we love the Palestinian soldier and the Israeli soldier? Do we love the Myanmar generals, imposing martial law whenever it suits their purpose? Do we love the undocumented workers living in Bridgeport? Do we love the homeless men in the Gillespie shelter? Are these neighbors part of the Christ & Holy Trinity community? For only if we love them as our neighbors can we claim to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and all our mind.

And if we claim to love God, we must reach out to our neighbors who suffer. Reach out to them whether they are suffering from illness, or poverty, or malnutrition, or illiteracy. So if we do that – if we love God and our neighbor, we're doing the right thing and everything will be just peachy, won't it? But that's not always the way it happens, does it? We try to do the right thing, but it doesn't work out and we suffer. Maybe doing the right thing isn't enough. Maybe we need to go a little further. Maybe we need to do the right thing....in the right way. Let's go back and look at those commandments again.

So first of all, we are to love God. But how do we show that love? Is that where the problem lies? After all, throughout the centuries, people have been punished solely for worshiping God differently. Think of the Inquisition. Think of the Protestant Reformation. Those who suffered loved God; those who persecuted also loved God. Where they differed was in the way they showed that love. So it wasn't their belief in God that others objected to; it was how they practiced that belief that was thought to be wrong. They did the right thing, but supposedly not in the right way.

And what is the right way to love our neighbor as ourselves? What are we to do to express that love? Jesus gives us very clear directions on this score: In Matthew 25, Jesus told us to feed the hungry, heal the sick, give water to the thirsty. (I think Jesus also told us to house the homeless, but Matthew just forgot to write one that down.) Jesus said these are the right things to do to show our love for our neighbor. We are called to reach out beyond ourselves, to learn what our neighbors need, and to provide it for them.

I've been privileged to spend the past two days with the Christ & Holy Trinity Faith in Action Team as we explored ways for Christ & Holy Trinity to demonstrate our love of our neighbors. We are looking at various "right things" to do to address needs in our community, our region, and our world. We are investigating the many "right ways" that we could reach out to those who are sick, or hungry, or homeless, or hopeless. We are searching for ways to give each of us a chance to show our love for our neighbors. Our church budget includes money for these programs – annually we have sent contributions to a variety of local, regional and international programs. And we have used our time and talents in a variety of ways – serving meals at Gillespie Center, building houses through Habitat for Humanity in Bridgeport, participating in food drives and the Gifts of the Magi.

But have we done enough? Each one of us has more to give – more that we could do for our neighbors. Don't we all have skills that we could contribute to making life a little easier for someone? Don't we all have at least a little spare time that we

could use to solve some problem in our community? Don't we all have some extra money in a piggybank or savings account that could be invested in a program of outreach?

Our Faith in Action team is determined to find new, and better, ways for us here at Christ & Holy Trinity to show our love for our neighbors. They will explore, and learn, and strategize to find ways for us, as lovers of God, to love our neighbor – to minister to the needs of others while demonstrating our faith in God. But which “right thing” should we choose? We can't feed all the hungry, or heal all the sick, or house all the homeless. What is the “right thing” to do?

This is not a simple question. We're inundated right now with national debates on the “right thing.” Is mandatory universal health care the right way to heal the sick? Is using tax dollars to prevent people from losing their houses due to mortgage foreclosures the right way to house the homeless? Will drilling deeper and deeper wells for irrigation water for food crops in the southwest ultimately dry up wells for drinking water? Will that solve the problem of hunger by exacerbating the problems of the thirsty?

Choosing among the various “right things” is difficult. There are many “right things” we could do: tackle hunger, or thirst, or homelessness, or illness. Let's take just one, hunger. Let's assume we want to solve chronic hunger in a developing country – say El Salvador. That would be a “right thing”. It gets more complicated, however, when we add the second criterion: in the right way. What is the “right way?” Let's see what we could do.

Well, we could send food to the hungry. That would ease their hunger, at least until the food ran out. But it would also make them dependent upon us, wouldn't it. And no one likes to be beholden to outsiders. Nor would it solve the problem of why they don't have enough food anyhow.

Maybe they just need to learn how to be better farmers. But maybe the soil isn't good enough to grow good crops – so we can send them fertilizers. But fertilizers have to be applied every year – will we want to be doing this year after year after year? Maybe so, but I doubt it. And do we want to send commercial chemical fertilizers? And chemical pesticides?

Or we could teach them to fish, since El Salvador is a coastal country. But that puts them at the mercy of the catch – it maybe abundant one day, and dismal for days thereafter.

Or we might help them build fish ponds in coastal lagoons where they can raise fish – enough fish to eat and plenty left over to sell in the local market where they can then buy bread and vegetables and fruit. We can teach them how to raise baby fish to replenish the harvested ponds. This solution will make the Salvadorans self-sufficient – no longer dependent upon handouts – give them economic self-sufficiency, and give them dignity and security. This could solve the right problem, in the right way.

This is loving our neighbor as ourselves by giving them the tools for the more abundant life we heard promised in today's Gospel reading. This is the right thing, done in the right way.

If we at Christ & Holy Trinity reach out to those in need because we are committed to loving our neighbor as ourselves, we can be confident that we will do the right thing, and in the right way.

We may still get punished for doing the right thing. Peter was right. We will suffer doubt, and ill will, and criticism. People won't understand; people will say it can't be done, or shouldn't be done; people will say we are foolish to think we can do this, or that. People will complain.

But the words from Peter should continually reassure us: “If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.”

What greater approval could we want?