

**Being Anti-Social**

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

May 4, 2008

Sermon preached by Rev. Donald Ng at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco.

Being sociable is an attribute that we value and encourage. At church, we enjoy our conversations on the sidewalk. Before Sunday school classes, we have a coffee time. Before we even come down for worship, we fellowship upstairs over eggs and waffles. When you and I are sociable, we fit right into the culture of our church life. And when there's any anti-social behavior, we are quick to stamp that out! For instance, when the little kids upstairs in the nursery are not sharing their toys, we teach them to share and to be sociable!

When it comes to the whole church and its relationship in the community, we also want to be perceived as sociable. We participate in the Chinese Christian Union with other Chinese churches. We are working with Old St. Mary's as a cooperative partner in the wake of a possible emergency disaster in preparedness. We give to the Chinatown YMCA building campaign. And many of you volunteer in a number of community and citywide organizations because of your own personal interest and/or your belief in their causes. The bottom line is that our church, FCBC is known in the city as a responsible and contributing organization for the commonwealth. We are sociable.

**Peter's Church**

When we are sociable, engaging in the life of the community and city, we become acceptable and an integral part of the status quo. Rather than being outsiders, we are insiders. Instead of being of suspect, we are coveted. Rather than being persecuted for our beliefs, we are accepted for what we have to say.

This was not the way it was when Peter wrote his letter to this group of Christians. It wasn't that the Christians were being anti-social, the society wasn't sociable to them. This was the time of intense persecution of Christians initiated by Nero. When the great fire in Rome happened in 64 AD, Nero put the blame on the Christians. Scapegoating them for the crime, he undertook vengeful persecution. Those who professed to believe in Christ were made the subject of sport, being covered with animal skins and attacked by dogs, nailed to crosses and set on fire. Christians were even burned at night for illumination of Nero's garden parties.

We hear occasional stories of people suffering today for their faith. Sometimes Christian missionaries are caught in the crossfire of warring conflicts and they become martyrs of the faith. Some Christians are held as hostages for the exchange of other prisoners. In Myanmar or Burma, Karen and other hill tribe Christians are fleeing for safe places because the repressive military government view these Christians challenging their control and power. There are still some places in the world where people are persecuted for their faith. But in most of the world today the kinds of suffering Christians face are milder than imprisonment, and far from the terrifying ordeals of those who fell prey to the devouring lion named "Nero."

**Our Suffering**

It would be hard for us as Christians of FCBC to compare ourselves with those who suffered under Nero. Trying to do that would dishonor these martyrs' faith and equate the petty persecutions of our comfortable world with those of Peter's day. Not many of us can say that we have suffered for Christ. As a pastor, one would think that I would be suffering but I live in Sausalito with a million-dollar view and I drive around in a Lexus!

If we choose to give up certain activities because of our convictions, what pain is there in that? If we are shunned or ridiculed by people who don't understand our quaint Christian ways, that is little enough to complain about. Besides when was the last time you can remember that being a Christian was a curse or a liability? Nonetheless, we must try to find a way to come to terms with this word from Peter, for it is certainly a word for us. How might we interpret Peter's message for us today?

If our society consists of the sum of prevailing opinions and practices in our culture, then, it is clear that living a life of faith is an anti-social way of behaving. Free societies like those throughout the Western world are increasingly opposed to the message of Christ and the lifestyle of faithful Christians. We may not be living in a society that is outright hostile to our faith but it is hostile nevertheless to the way of life Christ teaches. Let me explain.

Take for example how our newspapers and especially the 11:00 nightly news are always reporting on drug use, violence, sexual abuse, family violence, and crime. You will find it difficult, on the other hand, to locate many reported instances of wholesome behavior and godly activity. It is not that believers are inactive in the world, but that such things are rarely reported as news. When the social norm is to highlight, even celebrate depravity, Christian behavior becomes anti-social. When human nature runs free, it usually runs amok.

### **To Suffer**

In this very darken and violent world that we live: fighting a war for 5 years now, alarming homicide rates in Oakland and Richmond, budget cuts that affect the working poor and lower economic groups, and other pressing issues and concerns affecting children and youth, a light is needed to shine so that society is challenged, changed, redirected. Society needs something anti-social to lift it up to new possibilities.

In the face of the terrible persecution that these early Christians were facing, Peter speaks with hope. He takes their "fiery ordeal" whether it was being burned at the stake to illuminate Nero's night garden parties or the fiery pain of being attacked and beaten, Peter writes about hope. Just like a blacksmith would take gold and silver to put into a fiery furnace to refine it, their Christian faith is refined when they are put to such tests. Those who suffer for the name of Christ are to be united with him in his suffering. Those who suffer such persecutions are blessed because the glory and the Spirit of God rest upon them.

We suffer when we oppose societal values and norms that permit the reality that there is an under-class in the richest country in human history because economic powers want to silent us. We suffer when we choose to give money to homeless people who come to our church because there's a good chance that we have been scammed. Christians suffer when we look honestly at the role our country plays in the world and ask the tough question of whether by our arrogance, we have invited the world's anger upon us. But unless Christians suffer and put to the test, our faith might not get refined. And society needs something anti-social like us to lift it to new possibilities.

Sometimes that positive, anti-social behavior erupts spontaneously, as when a disaster releases the compassion of even the stonehearted. We have seen that happen occasionally, following terrorist attacks, hurricanes, and tsunamis. It happened to us in 1906 when our whole church building was destroyed by the earthquake and fire. The societal way would be to watch out for yourselves, make sure you're all right, making sure you have enough for yourself and your loved ones. But when these catastrophes hit, we have seen people doing the anti-social thing. They have gone against what the rest

of society would have done and did what Christ would have done. People raised money to rebuild our church after 1906. But, what about being anti-social during those less dramatic days that happen most of the time?

### **Fiery Light to the World**

Who should bring this fiery light to the world? Perhaps it should be the people who live by a higher standard of behavior than the rest of society; the people who have a different morality; those who seek to do the right thing when the news camera is off; those who have a solid sense of rightness and goodness. This people are you. When we suffer for Christ by standing up against what the society holds as valuable and important, we are then being anti-social.

This anti-social faith in Christ and not in the world is a moral compass that follows the Bible to guide them and keep them on track. And if we are reviled for the name of Christ, our faith is tested in contrast to the norms of our world, we are then truly blessed because the spirit of glory that is the Holy Spirit is resting on us.

Who should be the fiery light to the world? The children know the answer. They love to raise their little index fingers and sing: “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...” I’m gonna let it shine in the whole neighborhood, in society and in the world.

Do we suffer for our faith? Yes, perhaps some of us do.

Thomas a Kempis once wrote,

Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire the miracles but few follow him to the humiliation of the cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them.

If we take our call as believers seriously, perhaps many more of us will suffer for our faith. We have this anti-social faith when we let our little light shine knowing that sooner or later, we are going to get our finger burned. The reason is that the world doesn’t really want to be transformed and there aren’t that many who want to hear the message of Jesus.

Peter says that our suffering is like from “a roaring lion that prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” The world is in the grip of an adversary that prowls around looking for someone to devour. Sticking up our index finger to be that fiery light in the world is certainly like being prey in the mouth of a lion. It’s a good way to get your hand chewed off.

If we stand against such a world, if you act anti-socially, you are going to meet resistance. It may not be as horrible as it was in Peter’s day, but it will still challenge us to “humble ourselves and trust in the mighty hand of God, so that God may exalt you in due time.” We will be tested and refined in our discipleship. And in our action and witness, we may also give a lift to the world to confront social norms and values that are not in favor of God’s will.

Therefore, insofar as we face resistance and meet persecution for the sake of the name of Christ, then Peter’s words of comfort also apply for us, “Blessed are you because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God is resting on you.”

Let us pray.

God of strength and unity, Jesus prayed fervently for his disciples that they be protected in faith. Peter spoke to his people of the blessings that would sustain them in the face of their suffering. Even though most of us have not known the kind of fiery ordeals that fell to the early believers, we do face a world that is largely hostile to your word of truth. Give us strength to proclaim Christ boldly and to let the light of his love shine in dark arenas. If we face challenges or persecution, let the power of your Spirit work through us, turning our feebleness to effectiveness. And sustain us, O God, with the nourishment that comes from feasting on your word and the life that comes from the grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.