

Week 6 - Downtown

You are not alone

This series is about our overall well being. We're looking at 1 Peter chapter 5 and Peter's instructions regarding what it looks like to build on lives, practically speaking, on the rock that is Jesus.

Today I want to keep things very straightforward and very simple. I'm going to say some things that will seem obvious to many of you, especially if you've been around our church for any length of time. But I also happen to know that in a room this size, what the bible is gonna say to us today has the potential to save someone's life if it's applied. And I certainly believe that figuratively and probably it's true literally as well.

1 Peter 5:9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

Peter says we have a brotherhood. Don't get gender-offended on me. It means brethren, siblings, family. Most properly it's about the feeling of brotherliness or sisterliness. Someone you are bonded together with and making it through life side by side.

Peter says that part of the way we stand firm is by knowing that whatever we are going through, we are not alone. We are part of something bigger than ourselves. The family of God. And despite how it seems, despite how it may feel, despite what the internal narrative of your mind might say... whatever it is you're going through... you aren't alone.

Now for the people he's writing to there is a real specific type of suffering... in various ways, shapes and forms, they are experiencing persecution for their Christian faith. Their new faith in Jesus has caused them to receive hostility from the world around them.

We're not told precisely what they are facing, but given the examples we have throughout history, as well as the rest of the New Testament around this time period, it's likely they are

- being disowned by friends and family. Losing their former networks of support and care.
- Being ostracized by their communities... work, and business drying up because of people wanting to avoid those "Christians."
- In many places, even being killed for their faith and proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

And there's a very real sense in which Peter is saying, "guys, you're not the only ones this is happening to. Your brothers and sisters all across the world are experiencing the same things."

But, the point is there is a reason why that is particularly important and encouraging for his audience. There is something particularly comforting about knowing that it's not just me.

Easy example. one of the most powerful communities of transformation and change in our society: Alcoholics Anonymous. For what it's worth, AA actually started as a discipleship group in the early 1900's by a group that recognized that while there wasn't inherently anything wrong with what was taking place in churches on Sundays, the depth of relationship and transformation the Scriptures seemed to teach wasn't taking place there. So, they began this group on the side to recover the healing and transformational practices of the early church. And at the heart of AA is honesty and transparency - really confession of sin. The first step towards healing is to come to the table and say, "Hi, I'm Michael and I'm an alcoholic."

It's a place I know I can go to be honest about what's really going on with me... and be reminded I am not alone. I am surrounded by other men and women who have been through and are going through the exact same struggle, the exact same pain, the exact same fight that I am going through. People that I can call if I'm ever in a tight spot. People I can confess to when I fail. People I know have my back because they're in the trenches with me.

Despite the difference in circumstance, Peter's point here is much the same. In what you're going through, whatever it is, whatever pain, or trial, or hurt... you are not alone.

You are surrounded by others who have gone before you. Others who will come behind you. And still others who are in the thick of the battle with you at this very moment.

Critical to our fight for wellness is community. There is a direct link between isolation and negative overall health outcomes. If you want for things to go badly for someone, make them feel alone.

Here is how it's put in **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** [9] Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. [10] For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! [11] Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? [12] And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

And that's the whole point of Peter's words... you are not alone... you have a community, an army of saints, who have been where you've been and can be with you through whatever it is you're going through.

One of the beautiful things about being the church is we get each other. And we all have something to bring to the table for each other.

One of the regrettable trends in the American church is that somewhere along the way a lot of people began to shift their very concept of church. Church became the event we attend on Sunday. We say "I'm going to church." So instead of everyone thinking of church as a community we belong to, it became an event we attend where we may or may not have any meaningful relationships with the people around us.

And I believe that switch has proven costly to the overall health of Christians in our time and place. This is huge part of the reason we call what we are doing right now "a gathering". We know it sounds weird. But if even in a small way it can serve to remind us that on Sundays we are not attending an event where we receive religious goods and services, but instead we are coming together with a community we belong to.

The church is a community that, in Christ, we belong to. The church is a group who follows Jesus together. A network of relationships that help one another grow more like Jesus, carry each other's burdens, strengthens one another when we're weak... a community to encourage one another towards Christ on the good days and especially on the bad.

Peter says we have a community we belong to, a brotherhood, and these are people who can relate to us because they experience the same kinds of sufferings that we do.

If you've been around us for more than 10 minutes, you know that this is a drum that we beat constantly. So I don't feel a lot of pressure to sell the concept to you. And even culturally this one is

easy for us, christian or not. If you asked anyone, “would you like to feel known and loved? Would you like to feel understood by a community of people who you like and love?” That answer is going to be yes. I think the barriers to experiencing this are more subtle and downstream.

Peter says community is critical to our fight for stability and wellness. Even while we agree with him on the concept, let me give you a couple reasons I see as to why we might struggle to actually walk in it.

I’ll phrase them as thoughts you might have.

- 1) **“My situation is unique.”**
- 2) **“I am ashamed.”**

1) **My situation is unique.**

Let me tell you one of the most damaging lies you can believe or tell yourself: “I am the only one who gets it. No one else can understand what I am going through. No one else feels the pressure I feel. No one carries the same weight that I carry. No one feels as lonely as I do, as anxious as I do, as hurt as I do. No one else sees it like I do, so they can’t comprehend what it’s like.”

We are all tempted to believe that we are special and our circumstances are unique, right? That no one else is going through what we’re going through, no one else understands. That what we face is somehow worse than everyone else. That we shouldn’t even bother talking to others about our deepest struggles, because they wouldn’t relate or understand.

Despite what our moms told us, Peter’s encouragement here that you are not, in fact, that special. “The *same* kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

You are not facing something no one else ever has. You are not the only one who is suffering. And the more you believe that, the more you’ll suffer because you will feel alone in it.

1 Corinthians 10:13 [13] No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Your fingerprint is unique. Your struggles are not. Nothing we go through is completely unique to us.

We are not in a uniqueness competition, our hardships and sufferings are not meant to be held up and compared to everyone around us. Don’t play that game, because you can always find someone you think has it better than you, and you can always find someone who has it way worse than you (and if you can’t, you don’t know nearly enough people.)

No, a person may not know *exactly* what it’s like to be you. But, they do know what it’s like to hurt. They do know what it’s like to need the comfort of the Spirit. And they do have experiences, thoughts, and wisdom that can be helpful.

We have a brotherhood throughout history and around the world who have dealt with grief. I know way too many people who just can’t move through their grief because they think their grief is a special kind of grief. That they are unique and their grief is unique, but it’s not true.

You belong to a vast horde of Christians throughout the ages battling addiction, depression, spiritual attack, anxiety, eating disorders, compulsive behaviors and a thousand other things in varying

degrees and combinations. **Your struggles are not unique to you, and that's wonderful news because it means you're not alone.**

2) I am ashamed.

This is that internal thought that says "I don't want to be fully honest about who I am because I feel ashamed." Shame is that sense that I am broken and something is wrong with me and because of that I am unworthy of God and other people being close to me and valuing me.

So let me say a few things about all that.

When you say "I feel ashamed". Yeah, you feel shame. You are a human person. And shame is part of that equation. It has been ever since the Garden. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and felt ashamed. Ever since then shame has been part of the human experience. I hear people talking about how they are "eliminating shame from their lives", they're gonna live "shame free existence." No you're not. You're a human person which means shame is going to be a passenger in the ride of life until death do you part.

We experience shame in acute ways because of our sin. When we sin we are validating the fact that something is in fact wrong with us. We are in fact broken. We are in fact unworthy of God drawing near to us. So when you and I sin, we will necessarily experience shame. Unless you are a psychopath who does not possess a functional conscience. Now, in Christ, the present experience of our shame need not remain. Jesus died and rose in part to cleanse us of our shame. To remove our shame from us. To wash the shame of our sin. To exchange our sin with his righteousness so that I am credited with his total and complete perfection. So that now not just does God draw near to me, the Spirit of God dwells inside of me. God now delights to call me his. So that as a christian, when I sin and necessarily experience the shame that comes with it, I can give my shame to Jesus and re-experience the reality that "when we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So that the acute experience of shame does not move forward with me as a go on about my life.

Shame also exists in our lives, not just in direct connection to our sin, but broadly and more vague. Where I am not just ashamed of something specific that I have done or have not done. It's not about what I've done, it's more about who I am. Something is wrong with me, I am weird, different, I'm broken. And shame presents itself as this sense that if other people really knew the full whole truth about me they would push me away.

You know what is ironic? The opposite usually happens. When someone says "can I talk to you about something or let you in on something that I feel really ashamed of?" More often that ends with greater intimacy and closeness in that relationship. In part because shame is unifier. It's an experience that every single human person can relate to. You know how few things there are that every person on the planet can relate to? It's a short list. And shame is on it. So when you say "I am so ashamed of this" I can guarantee that the person you are talking to knows exactly what that feels like.

Now can I guarantee you a favorable reaction from others when you let your guard down and bring them in? No I cannot. You might have surrounded yourself with a crew of idiots and I don't want to be on the hook for their behavior.

But what I will say is that I have seen pretending and faking it mess up relationships way more than honesty and vulnerability. I'll just tell you that.

And in your attempt to gain some amount of love from others by pretending you have actually prevented yourself from ever actually feeling loved. Because in the back of your mind you always know that these people don't know the real you and instead are expressing love for a fake version of you. So whatever expressions of love they are extending to you cannot actually make its way down to your heart.

Shame will always be a part of your life but in Christ you have a tool to deal with it in such a way that it doesn't have to dictate your life.

You are not alone. Even in your experience of shame, you are not alone.

Conclusion:

Which brings us all the way back to where we started and the help that is available through the brotherhood we belong to. Let's end with one final thought about the brotherhood.

Heb 4

15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Sympathize there means "to be affected with the same feeling as another". This means that no matter where you, when you are, and who is around you, there is a member of our brotherhood who quite literally feels your feelings alongside you.

Because Jesus became human, we can know him and be known by him in ways that were not possible previously. He knows what it is like to feel thirst. Hunger. Loss. For grief to make its way up from a knot in your stomach through your throat, and into your tear ducts. Jesus knows what it's like to be betrayed, to be hurt, to be sinned against. Jesus knows what it's like to feel lonely. For his closest friends to abandon him. And Jesus is not just aware of what you are going through, which, awareness of what I am going through is amazing. That the sovereign Lord sees little old me. He has plenty on his plate, to be noticing little inconsequential me is incredible. But he doesn't just see and know what I'm going through. He feels what I am feeling alongside me. Unreal. What would I do with that information other than approach the throne of grace with confidence so that I receive help in my time of need?

Let's do that now as we have some time to respond.