eHOWHOPE

1 Peter 3:13-22

May 24, 2020

 Want to know how to cut an onion without crying? Wondering how to arrange marching band music, audition for Survivor, bathe a guinea pig, or cook couscous? Pondering how you might get a clue, be happy, be successful at home and work, or be a better partner?

Used to be that you’d have to do some serious asking around or head to the library to gather up all that info. Then, of course, came Internet browsers and search engines, and with them ability to Web-surf until your eyes go on screensaver. Seems, though, that the ‘net has gotten even more sophisticated in recent years with sites now dedicated to organizing all that info and locating it in one place in cyberspace.

One such site that’s breaking new ground in this area is eHow.com. It’s what the name implies --- a site where you can learn “How to do just about anything.” It’s a one-stop shop for all DIY-ers.

Punch in your how-to question in eHow’s search engine and you’ll come up with step-by-step articles written by readers and self-proclaimed experts on topics from relationships to business and everything in between. When inquiring minds want to know, eHow delivers.

 Look through eHow closely, and you’ll see that there are some holes. Type in “How to have hope,” for example, and you get some ideas on how to have inner peace, or how to carry on when a loved one dies. Those are important, of course, but the advice tends to be pretty individualized. Type in a tougher question, like ‘How to suffer faithfully” and the only thing that pops up is an article about how to treat a pinched nerve.

For some questions you just have to skip the digital database and go straight back to the analog. Suffering faithfully and maintaining hope in the midst of persecution are the kinds of “how-tos” that you can find only in the pages of Scripture.

A Scripture database, if you will. Call it an sHow, not eHow, [an sHow] a Scripture source of know-how.

First Peter was written as a how-to letter of encouragement to the churches “scattered” throughout Asia Minor – churches that had become alienated from the prevailing Roman culture and who were increasingly being slandered and persecuted because of their faith. The evidence from the letter itself seems to indicate that the persecution was more localized at this point than the later empire-wide campaigns against Christianity that form the basis of other New Testament books like Revelation.

Still, the writer saw the Christians in these communities as “exiles” who had left behind the beliefs and practices of their pagan neighbors and families, and who now were strangers and “aliens” in their own hometowns (I Peter 1:1-2; 2:11). Refusing to buy into the pagan practice s and world view of their social networks, the members of the Christian community soon became targets for insults, discrimination, and even violence.

Peter , however, didn’t see their situation as necessarily a bad thing. The suffering of these fledgling Christians would offer a unique opportunity to share the “hope” what was within them.

It may not be as dangerous to live the Christian life in 21st century America as it was in first-century Asia Minor, but the truth is that the Christian faith is still under attack. A spate of best-selling books in recent years blames the violence in the world on religious people, and touts the virtues of pure reason over and against faith. D-list “celebrities” like Kathy Griffin have used award shows as opportunities to insult and demean those who believe. Granted, its’ not exactly the same as being tossed to the lions in a Roman coliseum, but the subtle-- and not-so-subtle-- jabs at Christianity can leave believers reluctant to live and share their faith.

Notice, however, that Peter called people to be ready to defend the “hope that is in you” (3:15). *The apologetic here isn’t about being right and winning the cultural argument. It’s about being faithful in the midst of a hostile culture.* Read this week’s passage in that context and it reads kind of like an eHow list: *“How to Have Hope in the Midst of Hostility,*” Borrowing the eHow approach, and expanding the context a bit to include 1Peter 3:8-12, (the paragraph just before ours this morning) his scriptural DIY project breaks down like this:

**Step One: Begin with an attitude of love.**

 The writer begins in verse 8 by reminding the churches that they must reflect a “unity of spirit” by focusing on the primary virtues of the Christian life: “sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” The sense here is that they were to practice these virtues within their own communities of faith until they became habits.

Perhaps one of the reasons that much of the world views Christians as angry, judgmental people has to do with the fact that we act this way in our own churches. It’s especially hard to love your enemies if you can’t even learn to love your friends! Now, I’m not talking especially about getting your nose out of joint with someone else in this congregation. I’m looking at denominational schisms and criticism of one theological bent against another about unimportant practices.

 Christians spend a lot of time taking stands on issues and arguing with each other when they should be spending more time on their knees together in prayer, taking on the character of Christ.

 It’s not that we shouldn’t be vocal, just that our words need to always be filtered through the screen of God’s unconditional love. Develop the habits of love and grace about someone close to us who rubs us the wrong way, and we begin to see others, even those who persecute us, as people who were created and loved by God, too.

 **Step two, then: Repay evil with blessing.**

We can’t control the attitudes and actions of others toward us, but we can control how we respond. A violent and belligerent world expects reciprocity and revenge—that satisfaction can only be achieved when you’ve managed to get even with someone who has wronged you. Peter echoes Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount at Mt. 5:12-12 here in vv 9-14 by flipping that assumption on its ear. If you want to experience true happiness or blessedness, you need to be willing to repay evil with blessing. That’s what the people of God, the followers of Christ, are called to do. The Psalm 34:12-16 citation in verses 10-12 here in our passage points out the kinds of blessings believers receive when they choose blessing over cursing: the promise of “life” and “good days” and the “eyes” and “ears” of God opened to their prayers.

 Repaying evil with good-- turning the other cheek so to speak-- isn’t a poplar notion even among many Christians who struggle with the possibility of becoming a doormat for those who would take advantage of their nonviolent and nonaggressive response, and oppress them even more. We’re called to bless those who persecute us, to endure unjust suffering if need be, but we’re not called to be silent about it. We’re to use those times of injustice to “make our defense” by speaking powerfully and passionately for God’s justice and truth.

 Jesus, of course, is our prime example. His words from the cross and even His silence in the face of His accusers were not passive, but revealed a deep strength that was apparent even to His enemies. Our words of love and our attitude of peace in the midst of slander and persecution can speak volumes. When you and I choose to speak the truth in “gentleness and reverence” we reveal the “hope” that is within us to those who “abuse us for our good conduct in Christ.” Hearing those words of hope, those abusers may indeed, be convicted and “put to shame” by their conduct (vv. 15, 16).

 **Step three: Face Your Fears.**

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” asks the writer. In a perfect world, that would make sense. We’d like to believe that things are fair and that people get rewarded for doing good, and punished for doing bad. Reality, however, is a different animal. People doing good are often the most tantalizing targets in a world where systemic evil works hard to keep the status quo of injustice intact.

 The truth is that we often “suffer for doing what is right.” But even then, says Peter, we are “blessed.” “Do not fear what they fear” is a quotation from Isaiah 8:13, where the prophet was to hold fast to his faith and not be swayed by public opinion.

“Do not fear what they fear.” People often fear change, fear a loss of power, and fear that which they do not understand. Rather than address those fears, they lash out at those whom they believe are a threat. Despite the ominous thought of having to endure unjust suffering at the hands of others, Christians are not to act out of fear. Rather, we’re to have a healthy fear of God, who ultimately holds everyone in God’s hands. Suffering will come, but “it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil” (v. 17).

**And Step Four**: (Maybe the lynchpin of them all): **Follow The Example of Jesus.**

If you want to understand the proper way to live out hope in the midst of suffering, says Peter, the best example is Jesus. Jesus was crucified unjustly, suffering under the worst human violence, and even spiritual torture, one could imagine—did even His not followers get it? Was this all for nothing?-- yet His death and resurrection were the ultimate triumph of hope over injustice, sin, and death. It was through that suffering that Christ was able to “bring us to God.” God’s triumph over Jesus’ death enabled our Lord to proclaim hope to the “spirits in prison”—those who had died before Christ came, and those like them who died apart from a saving knowledge of God (vv. 19 and 20).

Jesus continues to proclaim that message of grace and liberation to us in the present, through baptism, which the writer sees as “an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (v. 21). When we’re baptized, we take on the results of Christ’s suffering for us—the cleansing from sin and new life in God’s grace-- all the things for which we hope.

 In Jesus Christ, God has taken on the worst the world could dish out and came out the other side victorious. As Jesus’ people, we can respond to the lingering evil of the world not by retaliating, complaining, or retreating, but by proclaiming the hope, the *realized hope* that is within us.

We just need to eHow, or sHow, (“ScriptureHow,” right?) the rest of the world with that message!

Amen.