

THE GUARDIAN

1 PETER 2:19-25
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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On this fourth Sunday of the Easter season we encounter an uncomfortable text about an uncomfortable topic.

Suffering.

Writing to the Christian exiles in first century Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Peter says,

It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly...

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.

In this, Peter is echoing Jesus' own words in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

But we hear these words and we squirm. At least we should, if we're paying attention.

Is he Peter telling vulnerable people to not only tolerate but exalt unjust suffering as God's will? Is he saying that God approves of us when we lay down and take a beating when we've done nothing to deserve it? Is he telling Christians to just passively acquiesce to abuse? He certainly seems to be.

Is this not reckless and irresponsible? Would we not say that Peter is complicit in perpetuating systems of oppression?

Try, for example, to imagine how these words would sound to a battered spouse. This week I spent some time listening to the story of a young mother who had fled an abusive husband with her six kids and was now struggling to make her way, alone, in a city far from here.

After I put the phone down, I read this passage from 1 Peter. It seemed jarring, to put it mildly.

Or imagine how these words would sound to a kid who gets bullied every day at school. Or to an undocumented immigrant being threatened with deportation. Or to anyone who has grown accustomed to being on the wrong end of the score.

Could not passages like this be used by the powerful to keep the powerless in their place?

They can. And they have.

It gets worse.

The lectionary reading begins in 1 Peter 2:19. But in every bible I own—and probably in yours, too, if you have one with you—the passage quite logically begins one verse earlier.

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle, but also those who are harsh.

Everything that follows—all those difficult words that we heard about suffering unjustly—are addressed to *slaves*!

For many people, this is too much. It was too much, evidently, for those in charge of choosing the lectionary readings! A handful of the commentaries I read this week began by almost apologizing that this passage was in the bible!

How can we possibly hear these words as the word of God? Telling *slaves* to accept the authority of their masters and suffer in silence?

This is tough stuff.

How do we understand passages like this in light of our convictions that God is on the side of the oppressed, that God longs for justice, that one of the most prominent themes in the broad narrative of Scripture is that of the lowly being raised up and the powerful being brought down?

Well, the first thing we must always do is pay attention to context.

It's worth making explicit that Peter was writing to *actual* slaves. These were household slaves, so we probably shouldn't think of the mass trans-Atlantic slave traders. That would later come later (ironically and tragically, through ostensibly Christian countries!).

But the very fact that Peter actually addresses slaves is worth pausing over. Slaves, like women, were not the equals of men in first century Rome. Not by a long shot.

In a context where writing and delivering letters was expensive, it speaks volumes to the shape of the early Christian community that Peter would address slaves as valuable members of the church who had a spiritual calling and a moral duty, just like everyone else.

Throughout the ancient world, and throughout much of human history, slaves were considered property, not people. But not to the early Christians.

Second, we should note that the church that Peter was writing to lived in a different time and place than we do and that they had a unique calling in the spreading of the gospel in the Roman world.

Peter wasn't writing to a global church with two thousand years of history and political steps and missteps in the rearview mirror. He wasn't writing to a Christian church that

had risen to the heights of political power, who had been through reformations and wars, who had spread out across the planet in mission and, unfortunately, colonialism, who had shaped entire civilizations and influenced the course of human history.

In Peter's context, the Christians were a small struggling messianic sect of Judaism making their way mere decades after the events of Easter. They would likely have had no pretensions of ridding their world of slavery, or patriarchy or any other social injustice.

Their calling was to live out the gospel as those with little, if any cultural power.

And suffering as Jesus did was one of the ways that they did this. The second century theologian Tertullian famously said that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

And it was.

People in the ancient world were inspired and converted by the witness of the martyrs who died rather than bow to the power of Rome.

Other Christians at other points in history have had a different calling. William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero... These are just a few examples of influential Christians who were called, as Christians who *did* have some measure of cultural power, to challenge unjust structures and to advocate for those who suffered unjustly.

(And, it's worth noting that at least in the case of King and Romero, it cost them their lives.)

Third, we must always beware of judging history by the standards of the present. We do this all the time, unfortunately. We judge previous generations for engaging in behaviours that we find incomprehensible today (slavery, racism, patriarchy, ritual sacrifice) even though, if we had lived at that time and place, we likely wouldn't have been much different.

When we just simplistically import our present-day insights and assumptions into the past, we fail to acknowledge that we are part of a story that is *in motion*, and that God's spirit has been at work throughout history in incrementally moving the story forward.

So we should be careful that we don't write off passages like this one because they don't reflect our present-day norms—norms that have been the result of two thousand years of church history and human history and God's interaction with both.

God has always chosen to work through broken people and broken systems.

We can feel upset and confused because Peter didn't just condemn the institution of slavery. Or we can be grateful that God is at work at every part of the story, moving things forward.

Perhaps these realizations can help us make some sense of our passage today.

But in the end, even these three qualifications probably don't nicely tie up every loose end to your satisfaction.

The truth is, we cannot write uncomfortable passages like 1 Peter 2 out of our bibles. We cannot write unjust suffering out of its central role in the Christian story.

God's response to suffering was to offer not an airtight, tidy explanation, but a person. This is foundational to what we believe and to who we are, as followers of Jesus.

So what do we do, how do we think, how do we adjust our lenses as Christians in our time and place when it comes to suffering?

Well, we don't seek out suffering.

We don't interpret every inconvenience or critique or failure in the broader culture to privilege Christianity *as* suffering (Christians in the west are good at this one!)

We *certainly* don't demand suffering on behalf of others. The early church *chose* to interpret their suffering as an imitation of Christ, it wasn't forced upon them. If we who have power and privilege ever find ourselves using passages like this to keep people with no power in their place, we have taken a horribly wrong turn!

Instead, I think passages like this are fundamentally about changing how we *understand* suffering and about learning how to suffer *as Christians*.

For the Christian, we look at the world through Easter-shaped lenses. Everything about how we understand God, everything about how we understand who we are, everything we understand about what we are to do in the world is to run through this grid.

The crucifixion and resurrection don't just proclaim what God *did* but who God *is*.

As Christians, we also believe that crucifixion and resurrection express the very heart of God's nature, character, and orientation toward the world.

And, if God's eternal nature has the character of suffering, self-giving, enemy-embracing love, of dying and rising to new life for the sake of the world he created, and if we are called to be imitators of God, then it follows that the Christian's life is to exhibit the same pattern: dying (to self, primarily), bearing the pain of the world, and rising to new forms of life in anticipation of the final resurrection.

This is our pattern because this is our God.

Brian Zahnd recently remarked that, "Pain is the price of admission into life."

None of us avoids suffering.

Sometimes it is suffering we bring upon ourselves. Sometimes it is suffering that is utterly unjust and we have done nothing to deserve. Sometimes it is just suffering that is part of the price of admission to living in a world of brokenness and decay.

So given this reality, we have 2 choices when it comes to how we deal with the suffering that comes our way, whether it's suffering that is just part of life, suffering that we bring upon ourselves, our suffering for our faith.

1. We can say that suffering is just meaningless and negative; it can make us bitter and angry people
2. We can claim our suffering as meaningful and choose to suffer well.

As Christians, Peter reminds us, we look to the example of Christ.

Because Jesus' life of suffering unto death, not retaliating, enduring injustice was vindicated by resurrection, we can live into the hope that our suffering, whatever it's cause, is *never* the last word in our story.

And we can live into the hope that this approach to suffering—imitating Christ in refusing to retaliate in the face of injustice—changes the world.

There is nothing so revolutionary in all the world as this. Everything about first century culture and most cultures since, including our own, demands eye for eye. Our politics, our entertainment, the world of business, even our interpersonal relationships often assume that when someone hits you, you hit them back.

And, as Gandhi famously said, “eye for eye” is the most reliable strategy to ensure a world full of blindness.

It takes a true act of courage, of freedom, of faith and hope to say, I refuse this path. I will not retaliate, I will bear this pain in imitation of Christ.

There have been a series of images projected on the screen throughout my sermon this morning. Some of these are pieces of art that I have encountered in various contexts; others are photos I have taken on my travels over the last few years.

All of them have, in some form or another, been portrayals of the suffering Christ.

I chose to have these images cycling through this morning not because I want to exalt suffering, not because I want us to morbidly dwell on the agony that Christ endured, not because I think that being a faithful follower of Jesus means wallowing in pain.

I put these images up on the screen simply to remind us of who our God is and what kind of story we are part of.

No matter how we might come to terms with texts like 1 Peter 2, no matter how we succeed or fail or struggle to understand suffering well or, more importantly to *suffer* well as Christians, Peter's point is to direct people to Jesus.

This was enough for a tiny little church that was suffering. Looking to Jesus shaped the character of the early church's witness in the world.

Like Jesus, they were abused but did not return abuse. Like Jesus, they did not threaten but bore injustice as a way of imitating their Saviour. Like Jesus, they entrusted themselves to the one who judges justly.

And this is what we are to do, too, whether we suffer little or suffer a lot.

We entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly, the only one who can redeem the pain that is the price of admission to life on this planet, and the pain that comes by virtue of our devotion to Jesus and his way, the only one who can bring life out of death.

Our passage today ends with these words:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Jesus didn't just suffer to leave us an example or to provide us with new lenses for interpreting our own pain, important as these are.

He suffered to bring us home. His wounds are the source of our healing.

His righteousness in the face of injustice is the way in which we, who are so prone to wander like clueless sheep can be brought home to our Good Shepherd, to the guardian of our souls

What a marvelous expression. *The guardian of our souls.*

Our souls are guarded, protected, emboldened, healed by the one who suffered before us, the one who suffered for us, and the one whose suffering has been the means through which God is reconciling all things to himself.

No matter what we endure—rejection or ridicule, violence or brutality, misunderstanding or injustice, misplaced expectation or unfulfilled hope, grief or sadness—we know that Christ has endured these things too.

And because Jesus' story went through suffering to new life, we have the sure hope that this can be our story, too.

The last image on the screen is different than all the rest. Perhaps you noticed? It portrays Jesus in a familiar position, arms outstretched, but not on a cross in agony like many of the others. This one is an image of peace and joy and welcome and embrace.

It is the image that spoke to me of a good shepherd. Or a guardian of souls.

I'm not sure if you can see it or not, but there are still wounds. There are holes in his hands and his feet. Even in Jesus' resurrected body, his wounds remain.

And so it is with us. Suffering is part of the human story. It shapes us, sometimes in good ways, refining ways, character-building ways, sometimes in devastating, apparently unredeemed ways.

But because of what God has done in Christ, our wounds, though they are part of who we are, can always be part of a story of new life and hope, in this world and the world to come.

This is good news.

May God help us to endure what suffering comes our way in this life in the way that Jesus did.

And may Jesus Christ, the guardian of our souls, use the suffering we endure to grow us in Christ's image and to fit us for his kingdom.

Amen.

