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“The More Things Change....” - The World of I Peter and Us
1. More Precious Than Gold

1 Peter 1:3-9 NRSV 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

You’ve heard me more than once offer my simple threefold rule for how to do Bible study: Ask of any Bible verses these three questions – 1. What does it say? 2. What does it mean? 3. So what? You’ve also heard me repeat more than once one of the things my late mother was fond of saying: “For every question, there is a simple answer – that’s probably false.” Yet I think that **both** my Bible study rule **and** my mother are right in the sense that lurking behind my question “What does it say” are sometimes some very complex issues. You’d think that “What does it say?” might be easy, but the realities and difficulties of language translation show us that isn’t always the case. The word “charity” doesn’t mean what it did in the 16th century when the King James translators rendered Paul’s words “so faith, hope, and charity, these three, abide.” The Hebrew language doesn’t have vowels so translators are sometimes forced to guess what a given clump of consonants actually says. Mistakes creep in to manuscripts that were copied by hand for thousands of years, and over those years there were inevitably some copyists who wrote things in the margins that later got incorporated into the Bible text – which means we sometimes just don’t know exactly “What does it say?”

“What does it mean?” and “So what?” are also both simple rules that can be challenging to answer. The distance in every way between our 21st century American way of life and that of the first century Mediterranean basin is almost impossible to truly and fully imagine. Consider, for example, how you might try to explain what an ATM card is to an American living in 1875 – not really that long ago. You’d have to explain the concept of modern banking, electricity itself, electronics, the internet, what plastic is, and how money is not based on an actual lump of gold somewhere, to name just a few things that would make for a vast cultural barrier between us and someone from our own country just a few generations ago. How very much more the distance between our world and the world of the New Testament!

What is the point of this detour through the thickets of language, translation, and cultural difference? Just this: When it comes to the “So what?” part of our Bible study, we have to be extraordinarily careful that we don’t come up with the **wrong lesson** for what a portion of scripture means for our lives. One of the reasons that we read and study the Bible is that we believe that in its stories and in its teachings we can find ourselves **mirrored**, and therefore can learn more about ourselves and what we should and shouldn’t do. And as I said in my Good Friday sermon at the community service at First Presbyterian, we virtually always unconsciously put ourselves in the role of one of the characters in any Bible passage we happen to be studying. And that can be a good thing; it can challenge us, it can enlighten us. But it can also badly mislead us and make us go astray in ways that hurt ourselves and our world.

But hold that thought, because to see what I mean, we need to learn a little more about the writer and situation of our scripture for today, the first in our post-Easter sermon series about what the letter of 1 Peter can teach us. Most scholars think that, as was the custom of the day, the letter of 1 Peter was actually not written by the Apostle Peter but by a student or companion or understudy of Peter. We would call it

plagiarism but in that day it was a way of honoring one's mentor. It is also not utterly clear when the letter was written, but a good scholarly estimate is between the years 80 and 90, when Domitian was the Roman emperor. The letter was written to the churches in Asia Minor (what we now call Turkey) and its language and theology are clearly meant to speak to new Christians who had no Jewish background.¹ In other words, it was written about 50 years after the life of Jesus and preaches the good news of what God did through the resurrection in defeating the powers of death and giving believers, therefore, a reason for hope.

But stop here for a second; let's linger on the remarkableness of all that. Fifty years isn't so very long. Many in this room remember fifty years ago – 1967 – very clearly for it was a time of huge change in our country and our culture, and those changes begun in that decade have had huge effects just fifty years later. “Just fifty years” – in the same amount of time, whatever had happened on Easter morning in terms of the “mechanics” of the resurrection, it is utterly clear that it had an enormous impact first in Israel and then all the way to Rome and beyond. *Just fifty years* – churches had been established all over the Mediterranean basin and letters back and forth (remember, no internet, Facetime, or text messaging!) were painstakingly copied and carried on foot over hundreds of miles. Whatever we think exactly may have happened on Easter morning, the fact that the writer of 1 Peter is writing in the way that he does and to the people that he does means that **something** indeed utterly remarkable and life- and world-changing had happened on Easter morning that caused such dramatic and fast growth. For Easter's event, in the opening words of our scripture, gave “us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead....”

¹Cf. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1peter.html> for excerpts from scholarly treatments of authorship, date, provenance, etc.

The metaphor that 1 Peter uses for that “living hope” is that of “inheritance.” And part of what we need to understand by that is that “gentiles” – for you see, from the Bible’s perspective, anyone not a Jew is a “gentile” – have now been shown to be part of the family of God that the Jewish people always knew through the grace of the law and the teachings and the prophets. Through the event of Easter we too now know the good news that God’s love and covenant-keeping is eternal and cannot be defeated even when human evil does its worst. Nothing, as Paul famously wrote, will separate us from the love of God through Christ. *That* is the living hope that we now know we too are the beneficiaries, the inheritors, of. And part of what that means is that there is absolutely no license, reason, or warrant for **ever** saying that Christians have somehow replaced the Jewish people in God’s love. That **lie** has led to enormous suffering and enormous sin, as Christians under the influence of that lie have decided that if God supposedly rejected the Jewish people then they too could vilify and even kill Jews themselves. Please do not give in to this lie.

It’s clear that 1 Peter was also writing to churches that were feeling somehow beleaguered when he says “even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials.” This, though, is where we need to go back to where I began this sermon and caution ourselves against too quickly and too over-simply identifying ourselves with the wrong situation. What do I mean? Well, there were very likely two things happening in the locales to which Peter was writing: First, it seems that these new Christians were being made fun of or ridiculed by their neighbors. And we all know what it’s like to be the odd-man-out, marching to our own drummer while others don’t seem to hear the music we’re hearing and choose to mock us or refuse to take us seriously. That’s not a good feeling, and indeed, in Peter’s words, can feel like a “trial.” The second thing that many scholars think was going on was some official persecution of Christians by local authorities. Although we know that Empire-wide systematic persecutions, pogroms,

and torture did not happen as an official policy of the Empire until many years later, we also know that from the time of Christianity's birth there were indeed sporadic local persecutions by city or town officials. Paul, for example, was imprisoned and beaten more than once as he journeyed about the empire spreading the gospel.

The *mistake* that you and I make, though, is when we over-simplify read the situation of the people to whom Peter was writing into our situation and make the claim that nowadays, it is Christians who are being persecuted in America. That is simply false and it hurts our ability to truly witness to the gospel. Moreover, it makes folks skeptical of us and it betrays an utter insensitivity to the places in this world where Christians and Jews are truly and often horrifically being persecuted. As writer Benjamin Corey says, "There's no movement to banish churches and put them under government regulation like in China. No one is stopping us from gathering together with other believers, from feeding the poor, or even from standing on the street corner...." preaching.² Moreover, some polls show that over 80% of Americans label themselves as Christian, and 92% of our Senators and Representatives are Christian. Despite what some fear-mongering pundits would say, there simply is no "persecution" of Christians in this country – you remain free to believe as you wish, you remain free to pray in public schools and shopping malls and airports (and given the events on United Airlines in the last month, the airport may be a good place indeed to pray!) But, as Mr. Corey says, "The idea that America is hostile to Christians and that the liberty to practice Christianity is under attack is misguided at best, and a complete fabrication designed to control the fearful and ignorant at worst."

And yet, something feels off, doesn't it? For while the majority of Americans still call themselves Christians, as I've noted to you many times before it is also true that the

²<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/america-isnt-growing-hostile-towards-christians-its-growing-hostile-towards-religious-bullies/> The statistics cited in the next sentence and all other quotes from Corey are from this source.

rate at which Americans are abandoning Christianity, particularly in the last decade and among the Millennial generation, is unprecedented. Is that fleeing because of “persecution”? No. It’s because too many Christians have indeed ignored the ubiquitous Biblical command “Do not be afraid” and have instead given into fear-mongering, hatred of those who are “different,” and even outright xenophobia. And when so many of our friends and neighbors see this – and see hurtful and hateful words and deeds from such folks who label themselves as “Christian” – it is no wonder that they flee that identification. Again, listen to words of Mr. Corey:

Religious freedom and free speech is alive and well in America. These freedoms aren’t just tolerated, but embraced. What is not embraced, and what the majority of citizens... are growing increasingly hostile towards, are fringe Christian extremists who are trying to... infringe... on the rights and liberties of the rest of us.

Listen carefully to the distinction that Corey makes; it’s crucial: “There’s a massive difference between freedom to practice one’s religion in a pluralistic society where we all equally have that right, versus enshrining one’s extremist religious views in laws that are imposed on the rest of us.”

There is an opportunity, though, in all of this for those of us who know that the word “Christian” does not mean bigoted, who know that God’s love is for each and all, who cherish the freedom that our country and our Constitution gives us to witness to these things. You see, in Peter’s day, the shunning and skepticism and derision that followers of Christ were dealing with from those around them stemmed from their values. It was those early Christians who said “no” to the horrific common practice of killing female babies. It was those early Christians who started hospitals for the poor and destitute instead of leaving them to die in the streets. It was those early Christians who refused to worship Caesar, the state, and instead knew that God was their ultimate

ruler and judge, a God of grace not judgment, a God of hope and not exclusion.

That's our opportunity too. One non-Christian, Roman writer penned these words about Christians in the early days of the Church: "My, look at how those Christians love!" It's what made them different, it's what caused them to be made fun of. It's also our inheritance; it's what they have bequeathed to us. For we too, in the face of those who would be, in Corey's words, "religious bullies," have the opportunity instead to show that to be a Christian indeed means to love – to love the gay neighbor who is under attack, to love the Jewish and Muslim neighbors who are truly dealing with terrible acts of hatred, to love the homeless with our actions and our dollars and not simply criminalize them. "My, look at how those Christians love!" May that, in turn, be the inheritance we offer this world and which we in turn leave to those who follow us. May that be, in Peter's words, the deepest source of our "indescribable and glorious joy." For such an inheritance, such an opportunity, is indeed "more precious than gold"!

Amen!