

Charles Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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The World of I Peter and Us 2. No Good Deed Goes....

Peter 2:19-25 Common English Bible 19 Now, it is commendable if, because of one's understanding of God, someone should endure pain through suffering unjustly. 20 But what praise comes from enduring patiently when you have sinned and are beaten for it? But if you endure steadfastly when you've done good and suffer for it, this is commendable before God. 21 You were called to this kind of endurance, because Christ suffered on your behalf. He left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps. 22 He committed no sin, nor did he ever speak in ways meant to deceive. 23 When he was insulted, he did not reply with insults. When he suffered, he did not threaten revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin. By his wounds you were healed. 25 Though you were like straying sheep, you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives.

“Though you were like straying sheep, you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives.” It’s a lovely line that concludes our scripture reading from today, the second in our post-Easter sermon series about what the letter of 1 Peter can teach us today about ourselves and our faith. But it’s really not very much of a compliment to you and me! For think about those two images, “guardian” and “shepherd.” A guardian is someone who takes care of another person because he or she is not capable of doing so themselves. In most states, folks under the age of 18 are presumed not legally capable of caring for themselves and so need a guardian to do so. And when I think back to when I was 15 or 16, that presumption was undoubtedly right: the dumb and even foolhardy things I did at times proved that I really wasn’t as grown up as I kept telling my parents I was. In comedian Dave Barry’s latest book, he has an open letter to his 16-year-old daughter Sophie upon the occasion of her obtaining her driver’s license and in this tongue-in-cheek Q&A he makes the same point; here’s how that Q&A goes:

[Sophie]: Florida law strictly prohibits texting while driving. Does this law apply to me?

A: [Dave] Ha-ha! Of course not.

[Sophie]: If I stop at a red light, how will I know when it turns green?

A: [Dave] You will hear honking behind you. This is your cue to start wrapping up your current text [message] – unless, of course, it is important.¹

No, to be in need of a guardian is really not high praise for you or me.

And what about “shepherd”? It’s a ubiquitous image in the scriptures, of course. But it too is not a compliment to us. Writer Tim Challies says that sheep “are ...actually kind of pathetic, entirely dependent upon a shepherd....”² He cites a news story from Turkey in which “One sheep wandered off a cliff and 1,499 others just followed along. Can you picture it?”, he asks? “1,500 sheep, each walking off a cliff, one after the other.” He also points out that sheep are prone to wander into danger and are defenseless when compared to most every other animal. Challies says, “A dog will bark and growl and show his teeth to warn you away. A lion will roar. A rattlesnake will shake [its] rattle.... The best a sheep can do is baaa.... [There’s a] good reason that no one relies on a guard sheep” to protect their home. Herd mentality, prone to wander, and not well equipped to be assertive. Hmmm.... Well, maybe being compared to sheep, like being in need of a guardian, isn’t very complimentary to you and me, but it does have the ring of truth sometimes, doesn’t it?

And, like 16 year olds with illusions of immortality behaving recklessly, or when we act like sheep marching over the metaphorical cliffs of life, when such things happen you and I can suffer. That’s where 1 Peter’s letter picks up today, with the topic of how we should respond in the face of suffering. Last week we saw that 1 Peter was writing his letter to churches in what is now Turkey, writing to folks who were facing ridicule and perhaps even local persecutions for their faith. Today he is dealing with the question of

¹<http://www.rd.com/funny-stuff/dave-barry-teen-driving/>

²All quotes in this paragraph, and the Turkish news story citation, are from <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/dumb-directionless-defenseless>

how to respond to such suffering and what that suffering means. Hear again what he says: *“it is commendable if... someone should endure pain through suffering unjustly.... if you endure steadfastly when you've done good and suffer for it, this is commendable.”* This sort of advice is what the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously despised about Christianity; he claimed that such counsel celebrated weakness. Or, as theology professor Bill Loader put it, there are those who say that such counsel “teaches people to be doormats, to put up with abuse... and not to raise questions.”³

Last week I warned us about too quickly and too over-simplifying reading the situation of 1 Peter’s readers into our situation. In the same way, this morning, we need to realize that, again, the folks to whom 1 Peter was writing had a very different situation than we do and we need to be careful how we apply their situation to ours. Unlike us, they were being made fun of for their allegiance to Christ. Unlike us, the authorities were sometimes harassing them. Some of them, as the verses just before today’s scripture make clear, were actually slaves or indentured servants who had virtually no power over their lives other than their own attitudes. Again, that is not us. Three times in his letter, 1 Peter refers to those to whom he is writing as “strangers and aliens” to the world around them. And when you are an alien in your own culture, ruled by an Empire from a thousand miles away, when you have no power of your own, when your friends and your family have deserted you because of your weird new religion, then, yes, sometimes all that you may be able to summon is the dignified strength of enduring the suffering you are undergoing with patience and acquiescence, not returning evil for evil.

But, again, *that is not our situation*. Listen to what a theologian by the name of Richard Jensen says: “It is imperative upon us to understand this advice in its [context and its] social location. Peter is writing to aliens and exiles in the land. These were people who had no power to do anything other than suffer in their context.” But, he

³<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEaster4.htm>

continues, "These [verses]... have often been taken out of their context and applied to people today." And then Professor Jensen says this:

When we address our people today in twenty-first century America we address very few in our pews who are "aliens and exiles." We preach to people who have rights in our society who, therefore, have the ability to protest unjust treatment through the courts and through the halls of political powers.... Our contemporary hearers are **not** powerless to work for a more just world.⁴

Now, Professor Jensen is right in many ways, but in one important way he is wrong and that is what shall lead us to knowing how, indeed, we can *accurately* apply the wisdom of 1 Peter to our own situation. You see, when Professor Jensen says that "we" have rights in our society and the ability to protest, that may be very much true for most of the folks in this room, most of us who are white and middle class, and relatively well-off.

But *it is not nearly as true* for too many of our brothers and sisters of color, where we have seen once again this week a Black teenager shot to death by a fearful police officer. *It is not nearly as true* for those who have little or no or too expensive health care and now are threatened with having even that taken away. *It is not nearly as true* for our homeless brothers and sisters, the mothers and fathers and families we meet several times a year when we host IHN guests who have found themselves homeless through little or no fault of their own. *It is not nearly as true* for our gay, lesbian, and transgender friends who truly and too often must live as "strangers and aliens" as 25% of them have experienced or will experience a violent hate crime directed at them. *It is not nearly as true* for far too many of our elderly, too many of whom must make the choice between medicine and food, and where almost a quarter

⁴http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=59 Emphasis mine.

of women over the age of 80 live in poverty.⁵

In our day and our time, then, what 1 Peter truly has to teach us is this, in the words of one Seattle pastor:

To suffer as a Christian is to enter into... a loving relationship and suffer with those people around you.... Peter [says] that there is no greater joy than sharing the love and pain of life with our brothers and sisters.... [H]ere in our situation in America... **Christian suffering is primarily to embrace other people in their suffering.**⁶

If you only want to have, as the cartoon on our worship bulletin cover says, “a halfway decent life,” then maybe you are



decent life,” then maybe you are lucky enough that you can stop up your ears to those in our community, in our country, in our world who are indeed suffering

threats of too many kinds from the evil of too many people. But, if as 1 Peter says, you would truly follow Christ – the one Who “left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps” – then that is indeed a call to enter into His suffering by entering into and seeking to alleviate the suffering of His children, those whom He has told you to love and to seek justice for.

Hear Professor Loader’s words again:

Part of the "doing good" [that 1 Peter alludes to] must also [mean] "doing justice".

We often find ourselves in situations where passivity is collusion, where we can speak out... and need to do so. The more we come to understand how

⁵<http://kff.org/medicare/issue-brief/poverty-among-seniors-an-updated-analysis-of-national-and-state-level-poverty-rates-under-the-official-and-supplemental-poverty-measures/>

⁶http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_suffering_who_wants_to_live_in_pasco.htm
Emphasis mine.

oppression and exploitation work, the more we need to address them....⁷

We may not be “strangers and aliens” in the sense that 1 Peter’s readers were, but the Jesus Whom we follow calls us in a deeper sense to indeed never be comfortable when unwarranted suffering is happening, when injustice is being celebrated, when the hurting have more hate heaped upon them. For, after all, Jesus did say “My Kingdom is not of this world,” or, as Dr. Loader says, “Jesus ended up facing his [execution] only because before that he had the courage to alert people by word and deed to an alternative vision”⁸ – a vision that wasn’t simply a promise that things would be better in the life to come. No, it was also a call to action to you and to me to live as if we truly are part of a Kingdom, a society, where children are loved, where all of our elderly live in dignity, where women do not need to fear sexual assault, where the homeless are not criminalized, where those whose orientation is “different” have nothing to fear from bigots, and where, in the words of President George W. Bush, “In America, we are free to profess any faith we choose, or no faith at all [for] What brings us together is our shared desire to answer the call to serve something greater than ourselves.”⁹

It’s not an easy thing that our Savior, our Shepherd, the “guardian of our souls,” calls us to. For sometimes, as the old Nazareth song says, “Love Hurts.” And when we truly embrace the sufferings of our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, it will not always be a happy thing. But it can indeed be a joyful thing in the deepest sense of that word. That old saw – and the reference in this sermon’s title – says “No good deed goes unpunished.” But our Savior calls us to a deeper truth – that every good deed, every act that is at odds with the meanness we sometimes find around us, every act that

⁷<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEaster4.htm>

⁸ibid.

⁹Remarks on the National Day of Prayer, May 4, 2006.
<http://www.nationalreview.com/bench-memos/50441/down-memory-hole-matthew-j-franck>

seeks to alleviate suffering will be called commendable, will be called blessed. And not only commendable and blessed, but life-giving and sometimes even life-saving. For as Jewish wisdom would remind us: to save even one life is to save the world.

For that call and that assurance, thanks be to God! Amen.