

The Value (?) of Suffering
1 Peter 2:18-25

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Today's reading from 1 Peter is a hard text.

Now, I know many of you suspect that I could find something problematic in any biblical text, and there's an element of truth in that. But you must admit that what the lectionary gives us today deserves to be questioned.

The passage is especially hard if we read just one more verse than the lectionary advises and begin, as we did this morning, with its full punch:

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

This voice tells slaves to accept suffering, and, to prove the point, it appeals to the example of Jesus, who himself suffered unjustly. Jesus' suffering is in turn justified by Scripture, as the author identifies Jesus with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Jesus is the servant, the voice of the text claims, by whose wounds we have been healed. Although all have gone astray like sheep, Jesus the servant provides the model for how slaves can endure abuse without retaliation.

I could avoid the difficulties of this passage in lots of ways—maybe by focusing on the image of the sheep. How interesting that in John 10, on which Michelle preached yesterday, Jesus is the door of the sheep, and today, in 1 Peter, Jesus himself is the sheep. Or I could use

the text as an opportunity to talk about atonement theories and the theological worlds that go with them by focusing on the way the text talks about the death of Jesus at its conclusion.

But I cannot get away from the way the passage begins: the use to which this writer puts theology, the practices the theology supports.

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

If we would extend our pericope to the end of the chapter, we would hear similar advice being given to wives, along with a similar appeal to scripture:

Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord.

II

The entire book of 1 Peter counsels Christians to submit to injustice. For the Lord's sake, it says, Christians should accept the authority of every human institution.

Fear God, it says. Honor the emperor.

Throughout, it calls Christians to accept suffering as the mark of their calling. When they suffer, they should rejoice insofar as they are sharing Christ's suffering.

It's little wonder that historians propose that this book was written during a time in when Christians in Asia Minor were under attack, both from Roman officials and their Gentile neighbors. The writer of 1 Peter refers to fellow believers exiles and aliens, those who stick out from their neighbors, and tells those exiles and aliens to blend in as much as possible without sinning.

Conduct yourself honorable among the Gentiles [it says], so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

Christians might be free people, claims 1 Peter, but they should freely submit to unjust rules in order to make a witness. Don't insist on what the freedom of the gospel offers. Accept injustice. Don't make waves.

The book tells all Christians to accept suffering on the model of Jesus.

But that's actually what makes our pericope even harder for me to take. Unlike the rest of the book, this advice is not addressed to everyone. It is addressed to slaves, those already in the most-vulnerable position in society. It tells those in the most subordinate position of all to stay there for the sake of the larger good. What is asked of the Christian slave is far different than what is being asked of the Christian slave master.

III

There have been powerful voices in the Christian tradition that have opposed precisely that kind of advice.

For example, there was Martin Luther King, Jr. Writing from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, King criticized white Christian pastors for expecting African-Americans wait on justice. Those whites complained that by insisting on their own rights African Americans were causing division in the larger church, and against that thinking King raised his voice:

African American voice reads from the pew reads from the pew:

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth."

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

And there was Sarah Grimke, a woman leader of the anti-slavery movement who tried to advocate the rights for women at the same time. 1837, Grimke wrote to Mary Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, railing against those who told her that the cause of women's rights must wait until the slavery question was settled:

Female voice reads from the pew:

I am persuaded that the rights of woman, like the rights of slaves, need only be examined to be understood and asserted, even by some of those who are now endeavoring to smother the irrepressible desire for mental and spiritual freedom which glows in the breast of many who hardly dare to speak their sentiments.

The Lord Jesus defines the duties of his followers in his Sermon on the Mount. He lays down grand principles by which they should be governed, without any reference to sex or condition.—"Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16). I follow him through all his precepts, and find him giving the same directions to women as to men, never even referring to the distinction now so strenuously insisted upon between masculine and feminine virtues: this is one of the anti-christian "traditions of men" which are taught instead of the "commandments of God." Men and women were CREATED EQUAL; they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do, is right for woman.

These and numerous other voices from Christian history challenge 1 Peter's advice that some should postpone their causes for the sake of the larger body. Rather than suggest liberation should take turns, King and Grimke instead call for solidarity.

IV

Ironically, so does the voice of the very scripture passage that 1 Peter invokes to make its point: the suffering servant song of Isa 53.

As some of you know, Isa 53 is one of several poems in the second part of the book of Isaiah about a figure called "servant." Christians know this one poem best because the NT and the later Christian tradition apply it so often to Jesus. Along with the writer of 1 Peter, other Christians have seen Jesus as Isaiah 53's "man of sorrows" who was "wounded for our transgressions."

But, when all the servant poems of Second Isaiah are read together, the identity of the servant seems more corporate than individual. Some of the poems are explicit about that corporate orientation, calling the servant "Israel" and "Jacob." Within the larger unit of Second Isaiah, the poems contribute to the collection's larger point: that Israel's suffering in exile is about to end, but that the suffering it has endured is not in vain.

So, it's possible that Isa 53 is not about an heroic individual but the nation as a whole. In this interpretation, the ones speaking in this passage are the nations--who are responding to what has happened to Israel in its destruction and exile:

Voice reads from the pew:

*We accounted him plagued, Smitten and afflicted by God;
But he was wounded because of our sins,
Crushed because of our iniquities.
He bore the chastisement that made us whole,
And by his bruises we were healed.*

*We all went astray like sheep,
 Each going his own way;
 And the LORD visited upon him
 The guilt of all of us.
 He was maltreated, yet he was submissive,
 He did not open his mouth;
 Like a sheep being led to slaughter,
 Like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her,
 He did not open his mouth.*

*And to him God says,
 "My righteous servant makes the many righteous,
 It is their punishment that he bears;
 Assuredly, I will give him the many as his portion,
 He shall receive the multitude as his spoil.
 For he exposed himself to death
 And was numbered among the sinners,
 Whereas he bore the guilt of the many And made intercession for sinners."*

Even if you don't accept the Israel-as-servant interpretation of Isa 53, I hope you did notice how Isa 53 is about the way in which the servant benefits many. His suffering means that others don't have to suffer. Moreover, the poem itself ends with the exaltation of the servant, and in the very next chapter, the imagery shifts to Israel as a woman, who was once barren but now is about to burst forth with children.

I'm not suggesting that Isa 53 is a pure text, either. What it says about suffering needs to be discussed. But, what strikes me is its difference from 1 Peter. In Second Isaiah, suffering—and exaltation—are shared equally by the whole community. Some aren't asked to wait for the sake of others.

The suffering is of the whole. And so is the rejoicing.

V

These voices don't totally disagree with 1 Peter. **King** would have agreed with 1 Peter that Christians must not respond to violence with further violence. **Isaiah 53** would have agreed with 1 Peter that suffering need not always been seen as punishment for sin. And **Sarah Grimke**—well, she might have found something about 1 Peter she agreed with.

But when we hear the voice of 1 Peter, we also need to heard the voices of King, and Grimke, and Isaiah 53, lest we forget how the desire for peace can lead us to deny—or at least postpone—the addressing of injustice. We need to hear those voices lest we forget how scripture is too often employed to keep people suffering.

Maybe hearing those voices of the past, ones that are relatively safe to hear, might train us to listen to those who are still being asked to stay under the radar for the sake of the larger good.

- To the voices of women in congregations that invite them to serve, even to speak, but not to seek the official role of pastor.

- To the voices of LGBT folks whose pastors and authorizing bodies express private support but ask them to not to push for public recognition, on the grounds that it would be divisive.

- To the voices of those whose subordination is treated as less important than keeping the peace.

We need not only to listen to the voices of others whose our theologies keep silent, but like King and Grimke to speak on our own behalf when necessary.

VI

That is why as Christians we need the image and the reality of the table.

At the table, we hear again of a world in which there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free.

And that hearing compels us, again, to ask forgiveness, from God and from one another, for not listening hard enough, not speaking clearly enough, to what continues to divide us.

The table calls us back to the vision of equality and invites us to practice the habits of unity.

At the table, we remember how to hear and to speak, and to how to be one—in suffering and in rejoicing.