



LESSONS FROM 1ST PETER

Mid week Bible Study with Pastor Hetrick

April 29, 2020

1 Peter 2:19-25

SESSION 3- FOLLOWING CHRIST'S PATTERN

Some passages of Scripture shouldn't be read- that's how many feel about 1 Peter 2:18. It's why our lectionary starts the passage at verse 19. But, just because something exists in our world, does not mean that God is affirming it, nor does it keep us from learning from it. Without verse 18 we do not realize that Verses 19-25 address household slaves about how to live in trying times.

To delve into this, I'd like to start with the story of Bryan Stephenson, a Harvard educated African American lawyer, whose work is depicted in the book and movie, *Just Mercy*. Stephenson has devoted his life to representing death row inmates whose sentences were unjustly meted out. Early on, Stephenson goes to the prison to visit a client. The guard views him with disdain, then orders him to strip down so he can be searched. No white lawyer would face this.

For a moment you see the mental calculus of Stephenson's response. But then he submits to the demand, even though it is repulsive, and denies not only his professional status, but his very humanity. That's sacrifice in a way I can't fathom stuffing it down. Sacrifice too many know.

He quite literally sets himself aside for the greater goal of why he is there.

Should the conditions of the prison exist as they do? No.

Should people be dehumanized through such rife prejudice? No.

But if this was a story in Scripture, it might read, "Servants, be obedient."

This is NOT an affirmation or justification, but simply speaking how to navigate a reality by remaining centered beyond it. How to live for the sake of something greater. While systems need to change, to find the way to live so that hurt does not beget hurt. Trusting God in the midst of suffering is considered the higher calling. For slaves, life is brutal, then and now for those who experience it. There is no other way to see it. Especially if you practice a faith at odds with others.

Within 1st Peter, serving is reframed- what you do is not done for an earthly master, but for God.

Im truth, this passage and others have been misused to justify subjugation to earthly masters and systems of oppression. And at times the church has been complicit. But hopefully, our exploration serves to disarm this misinterpretation, and unearth what is intended to move us beyond.

Earlier in 1st Peter 2:11-17 the writer speaks, "Beloved, I urge you (as those outside society) to **abstain from the desires of the flesh** that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably...so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution...For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. **As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.** Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

Make sure your behavior does not give others the excuse to perpetrate such abuse.

This letter then offers examples for those who find they must operate in a subordinate position at the time of the letter, starting with slaves.

"Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For 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. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 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."

1 Peter 2:18-25 NRSV

What exists may not be God's desire, but while you are within such a time, this is how to live your faith.

Nowhere does this passage suggest that suffering is a legitimate condition for those who are abused, coerced or oppressed. Nowhere does it suggest that we adopt a stoic tolerance of violence. Instead, that there is an alternative.

It is subtle but I think important to recognize that slaves are being specifically addressed in this letter. In the Roman Empire- they were defined as "chattel" (a/k/a property); they lacked citizenship and were seen less than human. Their marriages had no legal force, their children belonged to the master, and only evidence obtained from them by torture was considered valid. This was slowly changing, but they could be bought and sold and their life was demeaning and cruel. No one bothered to address them in their own right outside of demands upon them. This letter acknowledges and includes them fully. Can you imagine being spoken to this way for the first time? I suggest we should not lose sight of the fact that no one else was addressing slavers- merely addressing them is a dignity.

Often times we see the world as binary- either/or. In this case- slave or free. But here, slaves are freed in the sense of being welcomed and equal within the community of believers. Within that community, there is respite. As people know each other better, there is support and aid. And perhaps even working for a difference.

That Christian writing sees and speaks to slaves, giving a place in community gives what is not seen elsewhere.

That may seem small, and it is, but "the arc of justice is long."

Slavery in all its forms has always been brutal and many slaves reacted accordingly, at times committing assault or even killing of a master, killing children to spare them such a life, escape and taking out frustrations on fellow slaves.

At the same time, in the world of 1st Peter, slaves were guaranteed work and food, not a given in the general world. Those who had neither sold themselves into slavery for a hope of better. Life was tenuous at best since criminal punishment for slaves included crucifixion, a penalty reserved for non-Roman citizens. To choose slavery over starvation was desperation. God most definitely was not affirming that. Slavery exists still in our world.

But why is no one addressing slave owners? Is it that this community did not have many? Unlikely. Nor is it that most of those addressed by the letter were slaves.

This leads me to the second important takeaway. That is the idea of what being a “slave” typifies- defenseless vulnerability. Defenseless and vulnerable are two words we cringe to hear, words we struggle with facing.

The writer is saying that this is how those who dare to claim a different focus in the face of the Empire around them will experience the world as well. Vulnerable-not able to use social props to push through. Christians hear elsewhere in Paul’s writing that there is no distinction by virtue of reach, gender, or status. Nothing to wield.

If we, as Christians, surrender these things to follow a sacrificing Christ, there is an equalizing effect.

We are all on the level of of defenseless and vulnerable. The Christ-like reaction we are called to adopt is that of sacrifice for those who have privilege, and joining those who do not have such privilege.

This choosing to subordinate ones self is not based upon social convention or political demands, but out of obligation to God.

In the midst of circumstances that provide a vulnerable life, we are to live in accord with social custom to the extent it is possible without compromising faith.

Where Christian calling collides with social custom or political expectation, the epistle tells us, “defy the custom, be ready to suffer, as Christ did, rather than abandon your calling to God.”

This is what the example of Bryan Stephenson lifts up. In an interview he said, “My faith influences and shapes everything I do. I remember growing up and the preacher would read from the prophet Micah: ‘What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.’ That has framed the orientation that I have for work and in the kind of life I want to live.”

Where is the good news?

+If you have ever struggled with self-worth, this passage affirms that the world does not decide your value, your Creator does and God sent Christ for you.

+ The "good" We do is not dependent upon affirmation, or even being seen. But lately have you noticed how we are more focused upon seeing those who are sacrificing?

Will we choose to focus upon good or be drawn to look for and see the bad and focus there? What signs speak of affirming God in the world?

+ We are given Christ no matter who we are. The writer of the epistle speaks of following the example or quite literally the pattern of Christ. In the Greek quite literally this "pattern" is the means by which children, by tracing over and over, learned to write. It becomes ingrained. This is more than just imitation, it is a call to something deeply rooted. Stephenson speaks of a passage he had internalized from his youth that shapes his work. Can you think of a passage that speaks to you and shapes your living out faith?

+The emphasis is upon Christ's innocence and response. What about when we are innocent and experience hardship? Sometimes it is hard to hold back our words or actions in a time when we most feel the urge to lash out or retaliate in some way. What does this passage tell us to use as our guide?

Regular non-retaliation is a hallmark of Jesus' ministry not limited only to the Passion. "Non-retaliation" is not acceptance. Can you think of a time when you chose not to retaliate when many might have said you were justified?

+At the very end of the passage, is another message of both reality and of hope.

The writer speaks of a need for healing in terms of being astray or wandering. We have wandered.

AND

We are promised a healer and shepherd in Jesus Christ.

In our current world, perhaps we can ponder how far we as a society have wandered from seeing our fellow humans as equal. Sadly nothing has depicted our sameness more than the fact a virus knows no demographics. What healing of society do we want to share in giving to the world? Can we turn to Christ's pattern to stay the course?

"We're not defined by (our) history, but we have to acknowledge it and that people of faith have a leadership role in causing the rest of the nation to believe that we can get to someplace better. Redemption is still available, but we have to repent, we have to give voice to our failings. Repentance breeds redemption. Collectively as a Church we need to do that." -Bryan Stephenson.

That may sound too large a task, but the last words of this passage are words of hope- that Christ not only has brought healing but is present to be the shepherd and guardian of our lives.

The story is told of a boy whose older bigger nephew was bullying him and declared, "I can beat you up!"

The other boy replied, "Yes, but why would you want to?"

What a life giving ending. God offers life giving options no matter what we face. We are called collectively to find them and to work for them. When we do this, those who are oppressed will no longer have to wonder how they will live.

In the words of one hymn- "Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life."

This is God's promise as we follow Christ.

