

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday)

26th April 2020, at Saint John's Church in Savannah

from the FIRST EPISTLE GENERAL OF SAINT PETER THE APOSTLE 2:19

This is [grace], if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfullyⁱ.

In the ancient world slaves supplied needed muscle in mines and fields, skilled labor in workshops and households. They occupied positions of responsibility as managers, doctors, teachers, and scribes – but in law they were chattel, things not humans. Their marriages had no legal force, their children belonged to the slave-owner, evidence from them was valid in court only if obtained by torture, and if a slave-owner were killed by slaves, all his slaves were crucified, even those who had no part in the killing. When treated harshly or unfairly by overbearing masters they had no recourse, no escape or protection.ⁱⁱ

It is to Christian slaves that Peter is speaking in today's epistle lesson (though that opening verse that says so is omittedⁱⁱⁱ), and it is precisely this issue – of “wrongful suffering” – that he is addressing: how to respond to unfair and unjust treatment. The mere fact that Peter is addressing the slaves directly is revolutionary. Pagan moral teachers only talked about slaves with slave-owners, they did not talk to them – since they regarded slaves as things and not as humans. But Peter is treating them as responsible moral agents – “as free men” (2:16) not restricted to merely passive or reactive responses. He is giving them the dignity their society denied them – but to which they had been called by Christ and the gospel. As Peter speaks, however, his pronouns shift from ‘you’ to ‘us’, from ‘yours’ to ‘ours’. It was likely that Peter saw that the condition of slaves - marginalized, despised, defenceless and vulnerable to harsh treatment – was much like that of the entire Christian community at a time when pagan society was suspicious, hostile, and prone to persecute Christians^{iv}. Thus the response of slaves to unjust treatment supplies a paradigm for all Christians, all of whom St. Peter says are “slaves to God.”^v

When you are treated unjustly, the natural human response is to get angry and get even - it's our way of restoring the moral balance that injustice has disturbed; but Peter invites his listeners to [exercise their freedom as Christians, to] choose another and rather surprising way of responding:

Slaves, be subject to your masters with all fear [he means “fear of God”]; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward [the overbearing and unjust]. For this is thankworthy [or literally, this is grace], if a man

for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

Let's be clear what Peter is *not* saying. Peter is not explaining, excusing, or justifying unjust suffering. He is not forbidding us legal recourse if we have it; or to seek legal reform, if that is possible; nor is he by any means giving us permission to tolerate the injustice that others may suffer. But for those who are in that state of suffering unjustly – and can't escape it or change it – there is a real danger of ceasing to do good, or doing nothing, or doing the wrong thing – returning evil with evil, of choosing the way of retaliation. Peter invites us to consider unjust suffering as *grace* (2:19) – as a gift from God to those he loves. [*This is grace, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully*]. Nor is his position eccentric: it is the position of other New Testament writers. As St. Paul says to the Philippians (1:29): *unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake*. If you are a Christian, Peter says, you are called to patient endurance of injustice, because what dictates how you take your place in society and handle your relationships with others is not the treatment you receive from them, even when it is unjust and unfair, but your relationship with God – what he calls your reverent *fear* of God, your *conscience toward God*, and the template supplied for us by Christ, who *suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps*.

There was nothing timid about Jesus. He was no doormat. During his ministry, Jesus was outspoken, fearlessly proclaiming the truth, criticizing those in power, engaging in debate, a champion of integrity in a corrupt and craven world - *who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth*. Yet in his trial he said almost nothing in his own defence; and on the cross eschewed the empty comfort the condemned often find in threatening and abusing their tormentors: *when he was reviled, [he] reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not*. Instead, St. Peter says, he *committed himself to him that judgeth righteously*. The choice not to retaliate, but to refer himself to God's just judgment is critical. Revenge and retaliation happen when we decide it is up to us to restore the moral balance of the universe, by making the wrongdoers pay for what they have done. But when we erupt in rage against injustice, the very real risk is that we become evil ourselves, and do evil; and so the victims become victimizers, hate begets hate, in an endless cycle of retaliation that is ended only in death. In his own royal freedom, Jesus refuses to be trapped in the cycle of retaliation. He knows that God will vindicate him, he looks to the Father to restore the moral balance, nor did he trust in God's justice in vain. The resurrection is vindication for him and for those who follow the example of his patience – who respond to unjust suffering not with anger and

retaliation – but commit their cause to God’s judgment, and choose rather to suffer injustice, than to inflict it. [We may not in the situation of 1st century Christian slaves, but we are often slaves of anger and pride. In today’s America, riven by ferocious disputes over social and political questions, where bitter factional animosity flourishes, where it seems we think it is not only our duty to hate one another, but also our pleasure – this is teaching of great practical relevance.]

The claim of Christ’s moral example on us is great – yet we shall be powerless to follow his example, except we know the efficacy of his death as an atonement for sin. In his death he did something for us, that we ourselves could not do, something amazing, unique, and mysterious, which repairs the relationship with God that our sins had harmed. As Peter says, in patiently suffering injustice, Christ *himself bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness*. Evil choices chained us to evil consequences – the sins by which we rejected God made us liable for eternal separation from God: by taking responsibility for them in suffering a sinner’s death on the cross, Christ delivered us from the punishment we deserved, and restored us to God’s favor and fellowship with God. Peter, quoting Isaiah says, *by his stripes ye were healed* - the wounds sin made in his body heal the wounds sin had made in our souls. Which is to say, because we know ourselves undeservedly delivered from judgment into favor with God, we can suffer injustice the way Christ did - without reviling and threatening - and to live the way Christ did - without sin and shame, but in *righteousness*. [On the cross, Christ returned the evil we did him with a good we don’t deserve, and so he broke the vicious cycle of retaliation. As those who have received the grace we don’t deserve for our evil actions, we too can return good for evil, and bring that same vicious cycle to a halt in our own lives. When evil elicits no response of evil from us, then we are delivered indeed from the chain of sin and death, by the victory of Christ.]

[This is grace, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake^{vi}. For even hereunto were ye called . Can we find grace in the call to endure unjust suffering with patience? Here’s what the old old (1662) Prayer Book said, by way of encouragement for those suffering adversity, and they apply to unjust suffering: “there should be no greater comfort to Christian persons, than to be made like unto Christ, by suffering patiently adversities, troubles, and sicknesses. For he himself went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain; he entered not into his glory before he was crucified. So truly our way to eternal joy is to suffer here with Christ; and our door to enter into eternal life is gladly to die with Christ; that we may rise again from death, and dwell with him in everlasting life”. For even hereunto were ye called. It is the mark of

the Christian, of one who is destined for everlasting life and glory in the resurrection, that he takes up his cross, and follows in his Lord's footsteps.]

Peter reminds his readers, that *ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls*. Indeed “we have erred and strayed like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, and there is no health in us”. We have acted as if there were no righteous Judge to vindicate us, no shepherd and guardian to watch over us and protect us, and we have indeed sought to restore the moral balance with acts of retaliation and revenge. But the Good Shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep, and is risen again to convert us to himself. In his watchful care, we have nothing to fear, not even from unjust treatment we may experience, *suffering wrongfully*. May he *Give us grace ... always most thankfully[to] receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life..* May he give us *grace to endure grief, suffering wrongfully*.

This morning we offer our praise and prayers to Almighty God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, and *bare our own sins in his own body on the cross, That we being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness*
For grace to trust in his sacrifice for us,
and so to follow the example of his patience
when we suffer wrongfully –
not seeking retaliation,
but committing our cause to God’s just judgment,
and choosing rather to suffer injustice than to inflict it

1 Peter 2

¹⁸ Servants, *be* subject to *your* masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. ¹⁹ For this *is* thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰ For what glory *is it*, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer *for it*, ye take it patiently, this *is* acceptable with God. ²¹ For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: ²² who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: ²³ who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed *himself* to him that judgeth righteously: ²⁴ who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. ²⁵ For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

ESV:

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

St. John 10

¹¹ I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. ¹² But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. ¹³ The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. ¹⁵ As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

From the 1662 Visitation of the Sick:

If the person visited be very sick, then the Curate may end his exhortation in this place, or else proceed.

TAKE therefore in good part the chastisement of the Lord: For (as Saint Paul saith in the twelfth Chapter to the Hebrews) whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh, which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. These words, good brother, are written in holy Scripture for our comfort and instruction; that we should patiently, and with thanksgiving, bear our heavenly Father's correction, whensoever by any manner of adversity it shall please his gracious goodness to visit us. And there should be no greater comfort to Christian persons, than to be made like unto Christ, by suffering patiently adversities, troubles, and sicknesses. For he himself went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain; he entered not into his glory before he was crucified. So truly our way to eternal joy is to suffer here with Christ; and our door to enter into eternal life is gladly to die with Christ; that we may rise again from death, and dwell with him in everlasting life. Now therefore, taking your sickness, which is thus profitable for you, patiently, I exhort you, in the Name of God, to remember the profession which you made unto God in your Baptism. And forasmuch as after this life there is an account to be given unto the righteous judge, by whom all must be judged, without respect of persons, I require you to examine yourself and your estate, both toward God and man; so that, accusing and condemning yourself for your own faults, you may find mercy at our heavenly Father's hand for Christ's sake, and not be accused and condemned in that fearful judgement. Therefore I shall rehearse to you the Articles of our Faith, that you may know whether you do believe as a Christian man should, or no.

ⁱ This Sunday's ancient introit touches on the themes of God's good shepherding, his providence in creation and redemption: *The loving-kindness of the Lord filleth the whole world, alleluia: by the word of the Lord were the heavens stablished, alleluia, alleluia*" [Ps. 33.5, 6]

Misericordia Domini plena est terra, alleluia: verbo Domini caeli firmati sunt, alleluia, alleluia. Ps 33.1. Exsultate, justi, in Domino: rectos decet collaudatio.

- ⁱⁱ t though the New Testament calls on Christian slave-owners to treat their slaves with justice and fairness, it does not criticize slavery, nor call for its abolition – there is nothing like the great Christian abolitionist movements of the 18th and 19th century
- we are tempted to judge the early church for failing to do these things, or on the other hand, weakly to defend it, with the argument that the church had to tolerate slavery because it did not have the power to abolish it
- But both responses miss the point - in the church's view Christ had already abolished slavery, and in the gospel was calling slaves to the freedom of his service
- all social orders, even those established on the basis of human rights and freedoms, are always only systems of relative justice and injustice
- But in Christ, in faith and baptism, all slaves are *free men*, beholden to Christ alone – and conversely in Christ all free men were *slaves to God*, as St. Peter says in 2:16
- outward distinctions of status remained in the world, but in the church and among the faithful “Slaves and free are differentiated ... only as Jew and Gentile are, or as married and unmarried are; it is a difference of social role without concomitant difference of dignity or freedom” ⁱⁱ

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- as Paul said to the Galatians: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye all are one in Christ Jesus*ⁱⁱ
 - Thus the early church took a more direct route to liberation than legal reform– emancipation from the outside in –but from the inside out – in the understanding of oneself as emancipated by Christ himself who calls us to his service in the gospel
 - ⁱⁱⁱ *18 Servants, that is, slaves, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward [the unjust]* The omission is probably to universalize it – which is probably in line with St. Peter’s own intention, that we see in the experience of slaves a paradigm for all Christians.
 - ^{iv} This surmise is confirmed by the fact that much of what Peter ostensibly says to slaves in this passage is applied elsewhere in the letter to all Christians
E.g. 2:21/3:9; 2:22/3:10; 2:23/3:9; 2:21-24 and 3:13-18
 - ^v " as free, and not using *your* liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God". 1 Peter 2:16

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