

“Enduring tough times”

May 15, 2011

Text: Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25

I.

What is curious about our reading from **1 Peter** this morning is that the reading comes from a section of **1 Peter 2** under the heading, *The Example of Christ’s Suffering*. However, the lectionary committee (the group of biblical scholars that recommends the weekly scripture readings) chose to exclude the first verse in this section, verse 18, from the suggested reading.

Apparently they think there are some verses in the Bible that should never be read out loud in a public setting. They may have a point. Here is verse 18:

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

Right away, we can see why they would want to leave this verse out. However, including the verse also helps reveal the need in the Church and beyond for *enlightened* biblical interpretation.

All of this prompts the question: what do we do with texts in the Bible that are used to harm people?

- Texts that have been used to support oppressive institutions like slavery??
- Or texts that have been used to keep women in their place??
- Or texts used to condemn gays and lesbians?
- What do we do?

II.

The first thing we do is try to put the biblical text in its historical context. To give the Bible a chance to breathe ... and to give us a chance to grow and to be guided and enlightened by the voice of the Bible, context is everything. We must read the Bible in light of its social/ historical context.

In first century Palestine,

- slavery was a common practice ...
- women were third class citizens ...
- and the origins of homosexuality were not well understood.

With this in mind, we can understand how some of the biblical authors would say what they said. They were merely reflecting the social/historical times in which they lived.

But—HELLO—the world has evolved almost two thousand years since the last of these biblical texts was penned. In other words, **GOD IS STILL SPEAKING**. In our denomination—the *United Church of Christ*—we really believe this: that new truths and new awareness, new wisdom and learning continue to break through every day.

In the 21st century,

- although some of the remnants of racism and bigotry are still with us, the days of slavery, for the most part, are long gone.
- And although we have a ways to go, gender equality is everyday more the norm.
- And as new learning and awareness become available, the origins of homosexuality are overwhelmingly considered to be biological, not environmental.

Increasingly, there's greater agreement on all of these matters. Why? Because, with the unfolding of time—everyday—the world tilts towards an openness to new learning and to freedom. It tilts towards justice; it tilts towards fairness and equality for all people. We this in full display in the protest movements that are sweeping across the Middle East.

III.

Having pointed all of this out ... with our starting point being a verse that was left out of our reading this morning—and we can understand why—it is ironic that the core theme of our text from **1 Peter** has to do with the *endurance of suffering*.

In fact, when we think about how the condition of slavery was in many ways justified and perpetuated from a narrow reading of certain biblical texts, it is amazing how these very slaves went on to claim this same Bible as their sacred text. What a stunning revelation!

This suggests the perplexing question put forth by New Testament scholar, **Vincent Wimbush**: *How does a people enslaved by a people of a BOOK come to accept that BOOK as authoritative and legitimate?*

It turns out, of course, that the overwhelming voice of the Bible is a voice on behalf of and in support of oppressed people ... suffering people. In the biblical story,

- God's own people, Israel, were oppressed under Pharaoh in Egypt, which of course is the background for the Exodus and the emergence of Moses, God greatest prophet.
- Centuries later, these same Israelites endured incredible sufferings and deprivations during their time as exiles in Babylon.
- And of course the voice of Jesus, God's Messiah, the one we call Savior—again and again is a voice on behalf of the underdog ... of the least of these ... of the suffering and the afflicted ... the poor and the destitute.

The African-American slaves, of course, could identify with these stories and with the plight of these biblical characters. And they could particularly identify with Jesus as the *suffering servant*, the one who suffered and died on a cross, the victim himself of an incredible injustice.

IV.

Over time, as we can imagine, and as biblical scholar **Barbara Lundblad** points out, the Bible itself became a witness against oppressive biblical texts.

1 Peter was written perhaps a decade before the end of the first century, to a group of oppressed Christians in Asia minor.

1. Historically, this was a time when Christianity was in its early stages of growth.
2. It was still very much a minority religion.
3. In many ways, these were tough times, therefore; times that required believers to stay strong ... to keep the faith. And in doing this, they often found encouragement and reassurance in the suffering of Jesus, which they identified with **Isaiah 53**, the Servant Song in the prophecy of Second Isaiah (Is. 49-55).

Endurance was a common theme in the evolution of the early church. Listen to **1 Peter**:

For it is to your credit if, being full of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. Remember always, he says If you endure when you are doing the right thing, you have God's approval.

And then **1 Peter** points to Jesus' example:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. (this is the substitutionary atonement concept which is often put forth by the biblical writers; although many of us wouldn't necessarily explain it that way today.)

Nonetheless, going on, *When Jesus was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.*

The point **1 Peter** wants to make to its target community of believers—many of whom struggled against persecution and oppression—is to look to Jesus as a model of suffering ... one who endured an awful injustice and affliction.

V.

I know many of us here this morning are enduring tough times. But please know that our suffering does not go unnoticed; we do not suffer or endure alone.

People come to church for all kinds of reasons. And of course, that is fine.

1. Some of us here today have a lot on our plate ... and sometimes, in spite of God's reassurances, we wonder how much we can *endure*. At times, with optimism in our heart and hope in our spirit, we think things are on the edge of getting better and improving. And then, something happens and we're knocked back again ...
2. Some of us here today have *endured* personal losses in recent times. And sometimes we don't know where to turn or how to work our way through to the other side ...
3. Some of us are *enduring* troubled situations with loved ones, family members ... whose personal struggles ... and pain ... and ups and downs tear at our heart and soul with an awful hurt ...
4. Some here today have *endured* injustice in the market place of life ... we've been unfairly treated ... and it's left us, at times, discouraged and downtrodden.
5. Others of us have lived through and *endured* decades of racism and homophobia, however subtle and not so subtle. We know more than we want to know about the malice and evil that at times darken the human spirit.

VI.

The word from **1 Peter** for all of us today is a word of support and a word of hope. Knowing that our God is a God of compassion and love and that Jesus himself *endured* unspeakable pain and suffering on the cross, we are encouraged to remain strong and to hold fast to our faith.

In such times, we are called ...

- to stay humble and grateful and to stay close to God in all things ...
- and, through whatever anxiety, whatever pain and heartbreak, to let love fill our hearts and spirits and show us the way.

One of the strange ambiguities of life is how what we endure in life becomes the means for us to go deeper in self-understanding and to grow as a person of faith.

Life's meaning and purpose come to us through the ebb and flow of our daily lives ... and sometimes, through the awful grace of God, a deeper sense of who we are and what our lives mean come to us through the sufferings and deprivations we *endure*.

But these sufferings and deprivations are NEVER all there is. Always, on the other side of the night, the light of the new day comes. Whatever the cost ... however deep the darkness, the light comes ...

For indeed, as the **Psalmist** reminds us,

*The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want.
The Lord makes us lie down in green pastures; and leads us beside still waters.*

*The Lord restores our soul and leads us in the ways of God's purposes ...
And therefore, even though we walk through the darkest valley,*

*We fear not, for God is with us ...
God's rod and staff they comfort us ...*

*And no matter what comes our way,
God's guiding hand is upon us ...*

And therefore, it is with confidence that we say ...

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives ...
And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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