

## Sermons from Park Hill: April 13, 2008

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**April 13, 2008**

**1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2: (18) 19-25; (3:1-2)**

**John 10: 10b**

**“What Was He Thinking?”**

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Back when he was a boy, in 1900, Howard Thurman read passages from the Bible to his grandmother. She had been a slave and couldn't read, though she knew much of the Bible by heart. So, Howard sat every day and read to her. But, she wouldn't let him read from Paul's letters in the New Testament, except for the famous discourse on love in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. She had had enough of Paul and the other letter writers as a girl when preachers provided by the master used to choose passages such as “slaves, be obedient to your master” over and over. She

knew that was simply not consistent with the story of the Exodus - the Hebrew slaves fleeing Egypt, of freedom in the promised land. Or the prophets who sought to change injustice. It also didn't match her understanding of Jesus. These were the stories told at night when the master wasn't listening - stories of hope and humanity during days when masters did everything in their power to try to make them feel sub-human. Something in their battered but not beaten spirit - something from God - resisted this dehumanization.

Thurman's grandmother was wise to question - and ultimately know to ignore - passages that were inconsistent with the abundant freedom of life in Christ. Even though no one in their right mind still uses the Bible to justify slavery or a separation of the races - except maybe a few hate groups in the woods of Idaho - these passages were not taken out of scripture. They're still there. So as we are reading along in our Bibles we're shocked when we read about being obedient to bad masters, women submitting to even the most cruel husbands and keeping silent in the church, stoning a disobedient child, putting homosexuals to death...

Like Thurman's grandmother, I rarely read and even less frequently preach from such texts. However, at some point avoidance becomes ignorance. And what do we do when we encounter such inconsistencies with the spirit of Christ. So, today, I'm going to tackle one of these difficult passages.

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This is the lectionary epistle for today: 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2: 19-25. It would be great if you took the pew bibles in front of you and turned to page 103 in the New Testament.

“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. [As it is written,] “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.”

If you noticed, verse 19 started in the middle of a thought, “For it is...” What immediately preceded it – verse 18 – makes all the difference. Those who put the lectionary together chopped off the sentences on either side of the reading chosen – understandably.

Verse 18 – “Slave, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.”

So the words that followed in our lectionary reading – understandably absent – are not about enduring pain while suffering, for instance, by doing justice; they are about taking whatever the most wicked and cruel master may do to you – justified or not – because, it implies, that’s what Jesus did.

Immediately before the verse about slaves, verse 17 ends by saying, “Honor the emperor,” or in other translations, obey the government.

But, then, look what comes immediately after our passage, in chapter 3, verse 1-2: “Wives, *in the same way*, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.” Did you catch the words, “in the same way?” “In the same way” relates immediately back to slaves and masters in verse 18!

Dealing with scripture on the obedience of slaves and those involving women, however, even in adjoining paragraphs, is very different. Catholics, Baptists, Orthodox, Pentecostal... Everyone today recognizes that slavery is an abominable practice, even if scripture seems to at least condone it by virtue of silence. There are no explicit condemnations - slavery is simply seen as part of the social fabric.

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Somehow the clarity and consensus that the Bible is simply wrong about slaves and obedience doesn't translate to an understanding that it was similarly about social custom when the issue involves women, or gays and lesbians. Consensus about changing social contexts is dropped. Southern Baptists try to make it "nicer" by saying wives should "graciously" submit to their husbands; the fundamentalist LDS polygamists in the news this week, however, think this is a great command, and adhere to it – brutally.

But, everything comes back to context. What were the social and political conditions of the time in which these texts were written? What else does it say? What are the passages before and after? What is the point today, or is there even one? If not, what do we do with it? And yes, cliché or not, what would Jesus do?

Peter, or someone using his name, wrote a letter to a community of Christians in Asia Minor - today's Turkey – that were an oppressed minority. They were a persecuted, misunderstood group and frequently attacked. Peter tells this group of victims: honor the government, be obedient to masters, and submit to your husbands. What a triple crown! But why? These Christians were seen as a threat to the established social order.

At one time everyone participated in the same pagan religious and traditional social practices. Now some of them were practicing a foreign

religion. They no longer attended community religious events. Furthermore, these Christian communities included women and slaves on an equal basis – or at least theoretically. But they were defying custom, or rather, order. They were, in fact, defying their masters and their husbands by worshipping a different God. Increasingly this was worrisome, seen as subversive to the very foundations of the social order. You were supposed to worship the gods of the head of the household. That's what held society together. But these Christians looked like a countercultural fringe group, with values that seemed to undermine their carefully maintained societies.

So, how do you prove them wrong? Don't look like a threat. Don't threaten their authority, therefore: Honor the government, Be obedient to even the worst masters, Submit to your non-Christian husbands no matter how bad.

The Christians in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter lived in an environment of suspicion and hostility. What did they need? A strong sense of identity and, as much as possible, a way to reassure the society around them that they are not interested in overturning their authority. Stick together, but be careful not to seem threatening. Eugene Peterson says Peter is saying, "live an exemplary life so that your actions will refute their prejudices." As written to this particular community at that time, it kind of makes sense - sort of. Maybe I can appreciate their predicament. Maybe...

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We don't live in that world. Christians are not a persecuted minority in this country. But there are places in this world where they are. In some countries they are oppressed because they are seen as subversives, following a foreign religion. Muslims in the United States must feel this to a certain extent. And you'd have to have an incredibly strong faith to survive whatever abuse may come from authority figures. You may even feel the need to glorify the experience in order to endure it.

I still think Peter is wrong and he's not helping his audience. I think it's wrong and I think it sends a dangerous message. It's an acceptance of abusive power; it's valuing victimization. I tried to think of what I would want to say:

- 1) do civil disobedience against a corrupt government
- 2) do everything in your power to escape and abolish slavery
- 3) put abusive husbands in jail and leave them there

Jesus taught, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." For the sake of righteousness – right relationships, not for the sake of passivity so others won't bother you.

There: the gospel according to David. These, however, address a modern world, where we have a measure of power. Yet, regardless, I don't see how saying that Jesus accepted his suffering for our good means that we could essentially encourage victims to value their

oppression. Followers of Jesus should follow his example and Act Up; accept the consequences of seeking freedom and loving your neighbor – as you love yourself. The abundant life.

I read somewhere that 1<sup>st</sup> Peter could be considered foundational for non-violence. Remember scenes of beatings, and fire hoses, and dogs biting in the civil rights movement? But this, too, is different than Peter's advice. A tactic of non-violence is to bring about social change. Peter does not seek change but a way to accommodate. He, at least it seems, encourages people to be passive toward persecution and accept it; don't upset the established social order – whether in your home or out in the world.

I can tell you I really struggled with this passage and many times thought I should just go back and choose something else from the lectionary for today. Anything else...

So, if this passage describes a world we don't live in, and it's true we can never completely understand the complexities of their situations, can I appreciate the purpose of this message to the persecuted Christian communities of Asia Minor? But I still couldn't preach this to a similarly oppressed group today. If I completely reject all of its advice to slaves and women, could I find in it maybe a message of comfort about a more "acceptable" embrace of suffering? Or could I perhaps find advice about

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obedience to God through anything? How about dealing with bullies? Non-violence anyone?

I had books spread all over my desk, searching for answers. I found lots of absurd attempts to explain away these verses. A commentary from 1942 said that obedience to cruel masters was about one's conduct with an employer. "This is about the attitude of all employees and the vexed modern problems of labor. This implies not only obedience but loyalty. We should be faithful to advance the interests of our bosses, and a desire to avoid all offensive behavior." He sounds like a lobbyist for big business.

One respected commentary tries to justify these passages by arguing that *this* suffering is good for you because you might impress your enemies – and maybe even change them. Could this somehow be construed as empowerment, to hold on to the hope that unjustified and cruel suffering serves a larger purpose? Stretched a little beyond credibility, to give yourself credit for enduring cruel sacrifices? That someone would encourage this seems awfully cruel to me. Is a bully ever really going to change his ways because his victim is nice? First Peter alludes to the ultimate justice of God, who will vindicate the abused... Yes, and that's not wrong, but... What was Peter thinking? Could he have known that writing this particular letter to this particular community about their particular challenges would be read as universal scriptural truth for more than 2,000 years? Would he have said the same thing?

I'm much more convinced of value of simply knowing that the context of their lives was the fear of Christians as a subversive fringe group with alternative values. That provides the perspective and rationale for Peter's words: Do everything you possibly can not to bring attention upon yourselves. But is that the gospel? Where's the good news? It's not in saying there is positive value in bearing unmerited - cruel - suffering as an example of Christ. Slavery is the most evil thing humans have ever dreamed up; 1<sup>st</sup> Peter simply accommodates it. He doesn't reflect the equality of Jesus' relationships with women, nor his dealings with authority figures. It seems to abandon the radical upending of social relationships Jesus taught about the kingdom of God. Would Peter, should anyone, dump this so we can all just get along?

I'm left with returning to the advice of Howard Thurman's grandmother as the best alternative. Concentrate on the Exodus, the prophets, and the life and Spirit of Jesus.

And we would know to help people flee from all forms of captivity and resist dehumanization – victims, don't let anyone convince you there is value in your victimization. Be critics of and try to change the government for good – relish our Christian subversiveness. Maybe they weren't in a position to do so, but we certainly are. And don't attempt to reinforce social customs but, like Jesus, seek to turn the world upside down with our love. Be different than the world – don't try to accommodate its values. Actually,

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that's one of the biggest problems of the church today – Our values, our aspirations, are often no different than the society around us.

Peter's advice seems to me, frankly, to be so "un-Christ-like." What was he thinking? Instead of lifting up his example as one who took on unmerited suffering, we should lift up his example of working for the kingdom of God on earth, no matter what the consequence. Jesus transformed the consequences – that's Easter faith. That is new life, an abundant life, in Christ.

We must wrestle with all Scripture. And as we will discover, some scripture is indeed a stumbling block. So we must continually ask: Where is the good news? What would Jesus do? And am I being faithful *in my context, with my abilities, with my resources*, to seeking the abundant life of Christ for all people – not just myself? That is what we must keep our minds focused upon – stayed on freedom and justice.