

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“When Going Gets Tough: Living Free”
1 Peter 2:13-25

This passage we are about to read from 1 Peter, part of it, the latter part, was chosen as part of this series when we put it together some months ago. At the beginning of the week I opted to expand it to look at the context behind the original passage, because a proper understanding of this part of 1 Peter is key to understanding just what Peter is saying throughout the letter. When you plan preaching far in advance as we do, sometimes we sense the Spirit’s work many months after the fact in how the selection of Scripture long ago speaks to where we are right now. Sometimes that happens. And then sometimes you end up with a passage that would be challenging in its own right but becomes especially so just in the timing in which it comes up.

Such is the case this week, and I’ll be quite honest with you. On Friday night, Frances and I were watching the news. They were showing footage of the protests in various cities, protests against the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, protests that in many instances were peaceful but, in some instances, had turned violent or destructive. And while watching the news, I read again the passage slated for this morning, and I recoiled at it, so much so that I was tempted to switch to something else and hope nobody would notice. There is an inherent presumption in my speaking of these things, because in no way, shape, or form am I the one best suited to do so, and so I ask in advance for your grace, for I shall surely misstep today. You’ll see why in a minute. [Read passage.]

Last week we began this series in the letter of 1 Peter, starting a five-week overview. The main thing to remember from last week as we go into a challenging text in a challenging season is that Peter is speaking to Gentile Christians facing the first major wave of persecution, brought about by the emperor Nero. He is speaking as one suffering to a group who themselves are suffering, and he’s saying that in their suffering, the hope of their faith may in fact be a witness to the world and the name of Christ might be glorified.

And in this passage, he is speaking on how the rubber meets the road. How should these Christians live under institutions that mistreat them? These are words that are, to our ears, offensive, even dangerous, because they have been used and abused to justify every measure of tyranny, cruelty, and injustice. We hear them and we ask, where’s the hope in this? Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Many years ago, a preacher shared a story of a drive he took with his brother. They were driving to Chattanooga one night on a two-lane highway. His brother was complaining that all the cars weren’t dimming their lights as they passed by. The brother was mad and declared, “Next time we pass a car. I’m not dimming my lights either!” To that the preacher said, “No, don’t do that. There’d be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all.”

The point he was making was obvious. Responding to aggression with aggression or even answering rudeness with more rudeness doesn't help anybody.

But there was a time, in Peter's life, at least, when he probably would've thought that was dumb.

About 35 years before writing this letter, Peter was out in a public garden late one night when a mob showed up to arrest one of his friends. He took out his sword, attacked one of them, and cut off his ear. I suppose it's possible he felt good about himself, that he had defended his friend, but he didn't have much time to, because his friend said to him, "Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." So Peter stayed his hand. Then they took his friend away and killed him.

Of course that wasn't the end of the story. Though his friend was killed and lay dead in a tomb for three days, he rose again, and Peter bore witness to this. It apparently made an impact on him. He saw firsthand the trajectory of his friend, his teacher, his Lord, endure suffering, endure injustice, and because he did not return abuse for abuse, because when he suffered, he did not threaten (as Peter wrote in v. 23), he was killed for it, but he rose again. In doing so he declared victory over the abuse, the injustice, the cruelty, over the power of death itself. Peter bore witness to all this. Filled him with boldness, because, as he would write years later in v. 24, "Christ 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."

And it was that boldness that led him in the Spirit to stand up and speak on Pentecost to the masses gathered there that day. It was that boldness in the Spirit that led him to preach and heal in Jerusalem. It was that boldness in the Spirit to declare to the Sanhedrin in defiance, when they told him to stop, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

So why does this bold and faithful man, this lion of the early church who did not shy away, in this letter to the suffering church tell them to stand down, and does so in a way that seems to say, if there's injustice, you just got to take it, accept the authority? V. 13 "For the Lord's sake *accept the authority* of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." Then v. 18, "Slaves, *accept the authority* of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those are harsh."

And these verses have been abused and used to abuse countless multitudes under the guise of Christian piety. Kings in the name of Christ would coerce the submission of their subjects, even under unjust rule, claiming, "I have been placed here by God, therefore obey." Slaveholders in the name of Christ would justify generational injustice and brutality, claiming, "You are called by God to obey me."

When I come to a text like this, I don't want to linger too long, because it's not hard for me to imagine someone who looks like me to have used these verses to justify horrible things, the effects of which we're still dealing with generations later. When I come to a text like this, I want to have some easy answer that will explain everything and tie it off with a little bow. I want to hear stuff like, "Slavery in the ancient Roman world wasn't like slavery in the American South." And that's true to an extent, with the biggest difference being that it wasn't primarily based on race, but on conquest, as in, when Julius Caesar waged war in France, or Augustus in Spain, or Tiberius in Germany, they all sent back captives as slaves, and that is a big difference, but that doesn't make it good. It was still involuntary servitude that treated people as property and, as Peter admits here, could still be brutal in its treatment of them. It was wrong.

So what is Peter doing saying, “Accept the authority”? Isn’t that just reinforcing something that’s wrong?

It is said that the basic unit of Roman society was the household. The household was the building block of social structure, the economic structure, the ethical structure, everything, and at the head of the household was the so-called *paterfamilias*. If you’ve ever seen *O Brother, Where Art Thou* you might remember George Clooney’s character declaring, “I’m the *paterfamilias*!” Means father of the family, literally, or head of the household, which might be a term we’re familiar with, but it meant so much more then. The *paterfamilias* was *in charge*, and so-called “household codes” outlined how the *paterfamilias* had nearly total control over everything and everyone in the household. That included his wife; that included his children; that included his servants.

And that had been around for a long time, but something changed once Rome became an empire. When Caesar Augustus became emperor, he was declared, among other things, to be the *pater patriae*, father of the fatherland, and it co-opted this notion of the Roman household with its *paterfamilias* and applied it to the entire realm, as if the entire Roman Empire was one giant household, and at the head of it, with total control, was this *pater patriae*, the father of the fatherland, the emperor. You might remember last week when we talked about how it’s impossible to separate some passages from the shadow of Caesar? This is one of them. That’s why Peter talks about the household and servants right after he talks about the emperor. They are linked.

And it’s not because it’s good. It’s not because the emperor was thought to be good or okay. It was quite obvious that the emperor wasn’t good. He was persecuting Christians. And it’s not because slavery was thought to be good or okay. It was quite obvious that it wasn’t.

Peter was writing as one suffering to a suffering church, and no doubt he remembered the instinct he had thirty-five years earlier to rise up, to draw his sword, to strike back, and maybe there were many tempted to do the same thing, who felt they had no other option, but Peter also remembered the Lord who showed him another way, a more perfect way. He remembered the Lord who when he was abused, did not return abuse, but bore our sins in his body on the cross, the Lord in whose resurrection we are born again into a living hope. And the witness to that Lord and the testimony against the empire that stands against them follows the same trajectory and is not defined by vengeance, but by love and life. V. 21, “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.” V. 15, “For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.”

That is what Peter is calling the faithful to do, not to submit because that’s their place, but to endure, because to do so would be a testimony that no matter the injustice or persecution meted out against them, they would not strike back, because their very lives bore witness that they ultimately didn’t serve a lord that would set himself above everyone else but that they served the Lord who gave himself up, who suffered, that a different power, a different hope, a different Lord was at work and in charge, a hope that led them not to hatred but to love. “Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”

That’s what Peter is calling the faithful to do, and it is not something that I can do.

It is all too heartbreaking that the topic of nonviolent resistance has to be at the forefront of national discourse right now. With protests continuing in cities across the country, some of which have become destructive, discussion about them has invited commentary that condemns them as riots and calls for peaceful protests.

I can't say that. I can't say that because I have no idea, I cannot and I do not understand what it is like to endure the disenfranchisement, the marginalization, the sense of crying out for a lifetime and not seeing things change. I can only repent for the prejudice that lies latent within me and be led by those who even in the midst of suffering grave injustice have faith, have hope, and have love greater than I do.

And unlike Peter who was speaking out of suffering to those who were also suffering, I can't say a dang thing to those who are suffering injustice and are responding to it because that is not a burden that I know, and therefore I am in no place to cast a call for nonviolence.

I can only lift up with awe and admiration those who have.

The same preacher who once told that story about chiding his brother to keep dimming his lights for passing traffic on the highway, later said something else along the same lines:

“We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.” That was Martin Luther King. I am in awe of the faith shown here.

I noted earlier that 1 Peter is all about hope, and that gives me hope. That even within all this hatred and injustice there are voices that have endured violence and persecution and prejudice, endured things that I cannot fully understand, yet they do not strike back, because they recognize, as King once said, that “darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.”

One of the cities witnessing these protests three nights ago was Louisville, KY. There the protests weren't just about George Floyd but also about the police shooting of Breonna Taylor a couple of months ago. The protests at one point became chaotic, and the police lines were scattered, and one officer became separated and isolated in the midst of the angry crowd and gets swarmed.

Then an unexpected thing happened. A group of men, mostly black, formed a human shield around the officer, protecting, honoring this personification, this extension of the very power they were protesting in the first place. I am in awe of the faith shown there too.

May we have the courage to hope as they did.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**