

Sermon for Sunday, May 25, 2014 1 Peter 3:13-22 "Them vs. Us"

At first glance, our reading from Peter's first letter seems like a bait and switch. Peter starts out by saying "who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?"

I hear that, and I think "Cool. I do good stuff, and I'm safe. Nothing will harm me."

But no sooner does he say that, but he follows it up with predictions that bad things WILL happen if I do good stuff. I'll be maligned. I'll suffer. I'll be abused.

What a sales pitch!

Sign on to do what Christ asks of me, and I suffer because of it. I don't get special treatment because I'm a follower of Christ. In fact, I probably get worse treatment because I'm a follower of Christ.

Hand me that contract! Show me where to sign up!

Ummm, no thanks...

In fact, Peter is giving his audience some instruction. Who will harm you? Probably just about everybody...

...and you need to just put on your big boy togas and take it. Take it with grace. Offer a defense with gentleness. Reverence. Accept that this is part of the deal if you are a follower of Christ. Try to share the good news, in spite of bad treatment. Take it, because it's part of what you signed up for. Take it – and here's where Peter lays a little guilt on the reader – take it because Jesus took it, for us. And if Jesus, that wonderful perfect son of God could take it, we should take it as well, since Jesus did what he did for us.

A good psychotherapist might challenge us if we went and lay on the couch and said, "I'm going to go out and spread the good news and people will probably treat me badly because of it, but that's okay. In fact, I want to be treated badly, because that's what Jesus did for me."

But we're not in psychotherapy and while it's not a good idea to volunteer for martyrdom, we need to see that that isn't exactly what Peter is preparing the listener for. He doesn't say we need to desire punishment or suffering. He just wants us to be ready when and if it happens, and to avoid responding to maltreatment in kind. We're supposed to give back with more kindness than we are treated. We don't volunteer to be martyrs, but we do need to recognize a teachable moment in the midst of the pain and discomfort, and try to use that moment to turn things around. Not any easy prescription, to be sure!

Usually, when we try to do something and get smacked down for it – the "no good deed goes unpunished" axiom that is so often quoted – we are not really in the mood to try and be gentle and kind with the one who was cruel or mean to us. We want to snap back with a sharp comment about how ignorant or stupid or cruel they are, even though we know that will not improve our situation.

But what would happen if, instead of that retort, we said, "wow, I see that really touched a nerve with you." Or "I made you angry somehow – what did I do?" What would happen if you treated your tormentor as a human being, instead of your enemy? Hard to do, isn't it? No one really volunteers to be maligned or abused or treated like dirt, and when it happens, our natural inclination is to fight back rather than to try to bridge the gap.

There is no moment when we are feeling less like entering into a relationship with someone than when that someone has been cruel to us. We want to demonize them. To name them as evil. To identify them as something other than us, something different. We want to protect ourselves from further hurt, and it is so much easier to do that when we view them as "other," not like us.

Think about how it plays out in contemporary politics. Instead of disagreeing with a public policy stance on the merits of the proposal, we demonize the person who put it forth, often in ways that have no relationship with who the person is at all. Thus we have people saying that Barack Obama is a secret Kenyan Muslim terrorist who was planted here like a Manchurian candidate. We have people saying that John McCain is an irrational, hot-tempered war-monger with a

secret interracial illegitimate child. This despite the fact that Senator McCain's child was adopted from India, and his temper, while legendary, is usually well-founded. This despite the fact that Obama presented ample proof that he was born in Hawaii, which is a part of the US, belonged to a Christian church in Chicago, and was in charge when the most violent anti-American terrorist, a Muslim named Osama bin Laden, was killed. Don't bother me with the facts, some commentators say. I'd much rather demonize someone as my enemy by saying how very different he is from us. Argue about policy? Why expend all that energy when you can simply make the leader of the opposing side seem like the antichrist?

And that is what we have been trained to do, and it is even what we have trained our children to do. "Oh, that boy who bullied you in the schoolyard? He did it because he is the son of a single mom. Don't ever talk to him, because he isn't like us." "Hang out with that Muslim child? You'd better let me know if his family tries to get you to say any of their prayers when you're over there. They all believe in jihad, you know. They're not like us." "Play with that girl who has Down syndrome? You'd be bored. She's not very smart, not like you."

What a shame, when being in relationship with someone who is different from you can be such a blessing to you both, even when that different person doesn't always treat you well.

The child with Down syndrome might be the sweetest and kindest child you will ever meet, and your child might learn some of those qualities as she is blessed with the smiles and conversation with her new friend. Your child might be a helper to her as well – always a good thing to learn. The Muslim child's mom might introduce your child to the delicious foods of their homeland, and encourage the two of them to go outside and play in the yard together. Hard to hate someone when you play with them regularly, right? Your child might one day have a conversation with that schoolyard bully and discover that he is, indeed, the son of a single mom who works two jobs and has no one to help him with his homework, and he is struggling in school because of that. It doesn't excuse his bullying, but might open a door to an offer to help him with homework. It might evolve into a different relationship than the one that you'd have if you simply called the principal and said "I want that child expelled!"

What Peter is doing in this passage is twofold: first, he is warning those to whom he is writing that tough times are ahead, and that they may suffer for their faith. It's believed that he wrote this letter shortly before the persecutions that were ordered by the Emperor Nero, and he wanted the people to be ready for what was the next predictable thing. He was right. Second, though, he is telling them that in the midst of suffering, there should always be a desire to reach out to the other person, the putative inflictor of such suffering. Peter could just warn his people "Hunker down!" But he doesn't.

He says to live in a way that can stand a close look, to live righteously, and he says to provide a counter-narrative, in that great verse "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." He suggests that, in a strange way, the gift of suffering is the possibility that the way we live our lives is indeed the perfect counter to those who persecute us. It's not just the words we use in response to those who inflict suffering upon us – it's the way we live our lives that shows the hope that is in us, the very thing that our oppressors might so desperately need.

And that is why, in John's gospel, we hear from Jesus that our first responsibility is to keep the commandments, to love God and to love each other, and then our second responsibility is to remember that Jesus is with us always. He says "I will not leave you orphaned." We do not walk this difficult path alone.

Stuff happens. Life is hard. People are sometimes hard on each other, sometimes cruel. We don't get a bye on all of that just because we follow Christ. But because we follow Christ we know what we need to do. We need to hew to the path Christ has laid out for us, a path of faith and truth and hope, and we need to always keep open the possibility of sharing that path with others, even those who frighten us, who hurt us, who think we are bad. We need to be in relationship with Christ, and because we need that, we also need to be in relationship with everyone, not just those who are kind to us or who treat us well.

The hope that is in us dies if it is kept inside us, in a vacuum. It burns brightest when it is shared freely, in the open air, with all who need it the most, most especially with those who need it most. And if, in offering that hope to others, we suffer, isn't it better to offer and suffer than to be afraid to even try? Amen.