

May 7, 2017, 4th Sunday of Easter

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Focus: Jesus Christ heals us by his wounds.

I have to admit that the reading from 1 Peter today is a hard one for me. Our short reading is a bit confusing because the lectionary that picks our readings cuts out verse 18 that begins the section. Verse 18 explains what this is all about: “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” Suddenly, it makes more sense. All this talk of accepting suffering is telling people who are in slavery to just accept it—not only suffering that comes from those who are kind and gentle but from those who are harsh. Throughout our own American history, passages like ours from 1 Peter today were lifted out and used to tell slaves that even if they were being abused, it wasn’t right for them to seek their freedom, that they should accept it no matter how bad it was, because that’s what Christ would want them to do.

That is a troubling part of our history as Christians. But at least at this point, we can say that it’s just history. I’m more troubled by this passage because of parts like verse 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.”

As 1 Peter says, Christ is our example. And there is no doubt that we are called to follow in his footsteps. Like Christ, we are called to share our bread with the hungry. Like Christ, we are called to welcome the marginalized and outcast. Like Christ, we are called to heal those who are sick. Like Christ, we are called to speak a word of truth. Like Christ, we are called to be peacemakers. Like Christ, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But are we really called to suffer like Christ? Is it really credit before God if we endure pain while suffering unjustly? Does following Christ mean that we seek out suffering?

Does following Christ mean staying in an abusive relationship?

Does following Christ mean sacrificing your health and wellbeing?

Does following Christ mean day-by-day putting yourself in a position of danger?

Does following Christ mean staying in a job, or a place, or around people who make you perpetually unhappy?

Does following Christ simply mean the more suffering the better?

It is so easy to take passages like this and turn them into a weapon. It is easy to tell other people to “take up your cross,” and “follow in his footsteps,” and if we only hear passages like this, we may be tempted to think that’s what the Gospel really says. But what I want to say today is that **it’s not.**

Jesus doesn’t call us to a life of needless suffering. He calls us to abundant life. He says so in our Gospel of John today.

The truth is that we are not mere slaves, not in God's eyes. And while the image of sheep that we hear today is cute, we are not merely sheep either. We aren't sheep who are defined by their uses: wool, milk, meat. But we are more than that to God. We are children of God. We are children of God who are claimed in the waters of baptism, marked with his promises, and sent. We are children of God whom Christ has already suffered and died for.

For parents among us, let me ask you: would you want your child to actively seek suffering to try to please you? Would you want your child to risk injury to life or limb or death to try to earn credit? Would you want your child to hate her-/himself to follow in your footsteps? Or would you want them to have life and the most abundant life possible? What would God our Father want for us his children?

Abundant life means following in Jesus's footsteps, yes. We don't want to be like those sheep going astray. We want to follow. But what kind of shepherd would intentionally lead us *toward* the wolves? What kind of shepherd would intentionally lead us *toward* the bandits? Not a Good Shepherd. Not the one that we have in Jesus.

That's not abundant life. I struggle with this passage from 1 Peter, but I think what we can say about it is that life as it is, is not always so abundant either. In this flock here on earth, there sometimes are wolves and thieves and bandits. There is going to be suffering.

There is going to be suffering because this world is not the way that God intended it. People don't always follow Jesus. People go astray because they seek their own ways. Despite the clear word of God, people treat each other as less than children of God. If we're honest, we do that, too.

Maybe we treat people as no more than slaves, making them do things for us. Or not being grateful to them when they do. Or yelling or threatening or guiltting to get our way. Maybe we treat people as sheep: what can I get out of you? Or we think that we can shepherd them in the way that's best for them, offering unsolicited advice or direction. Maybe when folks treat us this way, we end up being no better ourselves: retaliating, and on and on until we have all gone so astray that no one even knows who started it anymore: just that this is not how we'd live if we were children of God.

Jesus came into this world in which we live: a world of suffering, a world of sin, and a world of death. He didn't come into our world to lead us all back into suffering, sin, and death. Jesus came into our world to bring healing. Jesus came into our world to gather us back into his fold and to protect and guard us: soul, mind and body.

The message of the Gospel is not: seek suffering; but when we do suffer, seek the one who has already suffered. Our great and Good Shepherd: Jesus Christ. There is nothing in the wounds that others give us or the wounds that we seek out that can save us. It is only by his, Jesus's wounds that we are healed.

Jesus Christ died on the cross: once and for all. On Good Friday, he bore all of our suffering and all of our sins in his body on the tree: once and for all. That suffering is completed. "It is finished." Over.

If you are in a situation of suffering or abuse, the message is not “follow him into crosses,” but follow him from every cross in this world into the abundant life he offers. This abundant life was promised by our Good Shepherd, sealed in his blood, and guaranteed, free and available to you and to all when he rose from the tomb on Easter Sunday.

What Jesus wants from us is not more crosses—his is already good enough—but for us to follow him by living lives of righteousness. Lives of righteousness that reflect the work of our healer. Lives of righteousness that go from the healing fountain of his blood offered here at this altar and out into the world. Lives of righteousness that don’t feel like they have to choose between staying in evil or retaliating, but choose the still more excellent way of trusting that God’s love is for you, that you are his beloved child, and that he died that you may live abundantly. That love is sharable. That love says to the lowly slave among us, “you are called to be more than a slave,” and it says to the haughty masters among us, “you are called to be something better than a master.”

The love of Jesus is abundant life. And it’s not easy. Abundant life is brave. Abundant life means standing up for yourself, not to fight back, but because you have a dignity and a worth that was proved on Good Friday and won on Easter. Abundant life means claiming that Jesus died for you, too. And that you are no one’s slave, not even just a sheep, but a treasured child of God. **Amen.**