

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25

Peter Changed

Since the Sunday after Easter, we've been spending some time hearing from one of those first followers of Jesus Christ, a man who used to be a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, who Jesus called to "fish for people." Peter was an intimate associate with Jesus while Jesus did His earthly ministry in the Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean towns and countryside. In our first readings each Sunday, we've heard about things Peter said or did in Jerusalem right after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. In each of our second lectionary passages, we've looked at Peter's first epistolary letter to the churches in Asia Minor – modern day Turkey.

The thing that strikes me most about Peter is the profound change we see in him from the gospel accounts to the things he says and does in the Book of Acts. Think about the Gospel accounts of Peter, especially those passages dealing with Maundy Thursday night's arrest of Jesus in the garden, and Peter's three denials before dawn on Good Friday morning. He was cowardly. Peter talked a good game when he was with friends, but when the going got tough – he was gone! Even on Easter morning, when he hears that the stone's been rolled away, and Jesus' body is missing – Peter runs to the tomb, looks at it, and goes back home – literally.

Pete and some of the guys head back to fishing in Galilee, and the resurrected Jesus shows up and cooks fish for breakfast for them, and then has a conversation with Peter, telling him that he's been forgiven. Then when you look at the Book of Acts, and the two letters Peter wrote to the ancient church, there's an amazing transformation. He's no longer a coward. He's bold. He's willing to publicly proclaim the gospel of Christ – even in the temple in Jerusalem. Something very impactful occurred in Peter's life, because he's not the same man that he used to be – even before the crucifixion. What do you suppose caused the change in him? Let's look at what he told the ancient church, and see what we're being told today. Turn with me to 1 Peter 2:19-25. **Read 1 Peter 2:19-25.**

Submitting to Authority

When the representatives of all the church denominations in the world sat down to design the revised common lectionary back in the 1970's, they did a strange thing. They flip-flopped the order of a couple of the readings for 1 Peter. Last week we looked at the end of the first chapter, this week we're looking at the middle of the second chapter, and then next week we'll look back at the beginning of the second chapter. So for what we've just read to make sense, we have to fill in the gaps, so to speak. The section we skipped this week, and will cover next, are talking about Jesus being the

cornerstone – the foundation – of our faith, and what we do, and what we become in response to Him. Next week’s epistolary lesson is great – I hope you’re here to look at it, unless of course, Jesus comes back in the meantime, and we get to see the Living Word with our own eyes! That would be by far better for all of us!

Mid-way through chapter 2, Peter starts talking about submitting to authority. Now, that’s not a popular topic here in America – we don’t like listening to other people. We’ve been indoctrinated from a young age to believe that we have “rights.” Thomas Jefferson goes so far as to say we have rights to “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.” The problem with this mindset is this: what happens when me pursuing my happiness infringes upon your right to live? Or your right to liberty? Or when your right to liberty infringes upon my “pursuit of happiness?” See friends, our society was never designed to truly treat all people equally – it was designed to maintain and further empower those who already had power.

What Peter wrote wasn’t popular to some in the ancient church, either. Because Peter talks about listening to kings and governors – which is remarkable given that it was written during the reign of Emperor Nero, and the hunting down and killing of Christians. Peter even tells slaves, “submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh,” (1 Pet. 2:18). It doesn’t even sound like the same guy who was worried about saving his own skin in the garden on the night Christ was betrayed, does it?

Living Out Our Faith

Look what else Peter says, talking about submitting to authority, “For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God,” (verse 19). See, people in those days had this belief – which we often don’t nowadays – that folks in authority over them, especially of the political and religious type, had been put there by God. In fact, the idea of people selecting their own leaders is a relatively new thing, historically speaking. It wasn’t until the Enlightenment Period, roughly the late 1600’s through the early 1800’s, that people started taking our modern view. Until that time, most folks believed in the “divine right” of kings. They believed that rebelling against the King was the same as rebelling against God.

So when you get into the mid-1600’s in England – a period known there as the Commonwealth – when the leading military guy, Oliver Cromwell, with Parliament’s blessing, rebelled and beheaded King Charles I, it was scandalous. The British fought a civil war for the better part of a decade, before Oliver’s son, Richard, finally handed power back over to Charles’ son, King Charles II, in 1660. In all that mess it was ordinary, common people like you and me who really suffered. Take a look at the current conflict in Ukraine. Putin’s not suffering. Ukrainian President Zelensky isn’t

suffering. Granted, he's got a harder time of it than Putin – but he isn't going hungry. The people are, though.

When we suffer under terrible political leadership – at times we will – we're to be commended, Peter says, "if we bear up under unjust suffering because we're conscious of God." Meaning, we recognize that God is in control, that He's taking care of us, and we are suffering because of living a life in faithful service to Him. In other words, if we're mistreated for living out our faith. Now that's different, of course, than messing up – doing something wrong, and then having to face the consequences. Peter says, "How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God," (verse 20).

Commendable Before God

If we do wrong – if we rob a bank or steal from a store – we should expect to have Sheriff's deputies banging on our door in short order. They've got cameras everywhere. Have you seen them on the stop lights in Sidney? They're on there. If we run a red light, we should expect to get pulled over, or get a fine in the mail. I wouldn't be surprised if they don't have some cameras installed on those pretty arches they've been putting in, in the "Historic Downtown!"

Back in the late 1990's or early 2000's there was a young American kid – high school aged, I think – who was over in Singapore or Malaysia. He spray painted someone else's car. The judge sentenced him to being beat with a cane. Do you remember that? It was all over the nightly news for weeks. People here in America were real upset about it. Some of those news commentators even said things like, "He's an American citizen." "He's just a kid." "They can't do that to us." The kid did wrong, and he got punished for it. Nothing remarkable there. And well, if a Singaporean or Malaysian kid – wherever it was in East Asia – if a young citizen of that particular country would've done that, they would've been beaten much worse! So if we suffer because of what we've done – if we've committed the crime, we should expect to "do the time," or "pay the fine." That's part of the point Peter's making here.

The other part is, that when we are doing good, living faithfully as His followers – and God notices it, He sees what we do – He also works along beside us to help the specific situation, whatever that situation may be. So if we're suffering because we're following, and doing good – He sees that. He commends it. It's noteworthy to Him. To Jesus. Peter elaborates on this. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps," (verse 21), he tells us. See, Jesus gave His own life for ours. That's a fundamental truth that makes Christianity unique in comparison to all other religions. No other god ever gave himself in exchange for the lives of his followers. Only Jesus does that.

Jesus Was Tough

And if Jesus does that for you and me, there's also an expectation there, that we will be like Him. That we do the things He's done on our behalf, on the behalf of others. We don't like hearing that, I know. It's very counter-cultural. It's un-American, to suffer ourselves, for the sake of others. We live in a country and a culture which prides itself on individuality and individual rights. And these "others," let's be honest – they don't deserve it. They don't deserve one second of our time and energy. They're messed up. To say it another way, they're sinners. They're lost. They're doing stuff, like that Samaritan woman at the well we read about during Lent. It makes us uncomfortable to have to deal with "those" people.

But Jesus loves them. He took the nails for them. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth. When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly," (verses 22-23), Peter records. See, Jesus isn't like the kid who found out he was sentenced to get caned for spray painting someone else's car. He didn't boo-hoo around about life not being fair, or being American and having rights.

You know friends, Jesus was tough. Have you ever watched Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*? Produced in 2004, it starts out with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed. The scene where Jesus is beaten just sickens me. The whips they used in those days had bits of sharp metal and broken glass, which cut and ripped the skin and muscles right off the bone wherever they landed. I suspect most ordinary people would die simply from the beating which Christ endured. Yet He still managed to go to the cross – bloodied, bruised, a mass of bleeding skin and bones – barely recognizable as a human being. Jesus was tough – His love for us knows no limits.

Heart Problems

"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by His wounds you have been healed.' For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls," (verses 24-25). I want to clarify something this morning. In the Church in America, we have a lot of what I call "carnal Christians" running around. They claim to follow Jesus – they say they believe in Him – and they'll even tell you that they're going to heaven when they die. But their life now is the same as it was BC – before Christ. They haven't changed.

They've got all this head knowledge about Jesus. They know who He is, what He's done, maybe even what's supposed to happen next. But – they're stuck. They've got something in their life – a sin, or pride, or a closed mind, something – they just can't get beyond. They don't see clearly. They don't recognize – unlike that Samaritan woman we talked about during Lent – that Jesus sees their sin and how they're living.

They may even be a little self-righteous – “I have Jesus now.” No friends, none of us have Jesus – it’s the other way around.

He has us. He holds us in the palms of His hands. He loves us, despite our sin – and loves us enough to want to see us changed into new people. He loves us enough to be the Guardian of our soul. See, we don’t have a head problem here in the Church in America. We know very well who Jesus is, what He’s done for us, and what He expects us to do. What we have here in the West, and in the United States, specifically, is a heart problem. We want all the fanfare and pageantry of Easter and Christmas – the outward appearances of belonging and of being Christian. But can’t we just live our lives how we want? Can’t we just go on living like heathens on Mondays through Saturdays, and show up for an hour on Sunday mornings to church, and have everything be alright?

Guardian of the Soul

That’s not faith. Living like that – the way a lot of people who claim to be Christian in the United States do – it’s not going to get them to heaven, if that’s their end goal. I want to tell you right now – heaven isn’t my end goal. Being able to see Jesus Christ face-to-face – to be physically present with Him – that’s my end goal. I want more Jesus. I want more of Him than this temporary life – than this sin-sick, dying world can give. I want to see Him as clearly as He sees me. And I want to love Him as deeply as He has loved me.

So how do we do this? The only way this happens is by us giving up. Giving up doing things our way, and starting to do things God’s way. Giving up on self – and wanting what Jesus wants. See, when we truly decide to put our trust, our faith, our belief, in Jesus Christ – when we go “all in” – as my Grandpa Dorsey used to say to Aunt Rita when they’d play poker with quarters – with our heads and our hearts, and let Him be the Absolute Monarch of our lives, then we can have assurance of salvation. We can rest assured that He is, in fact, the Guardian of the soul. He’s guarding each one of our souls. I want to close out with prayer. Do you have that assurance of salvation today, New Hope? If you do, give Him some thanks and praise for it! But friends, if you don’t, if you’re not sure, do you want it? If you need Him – be bold, tell Him – because “a broken and contrite heart, He will not despise,” (Psalm 51:17)!
A few minutes for silent prayer, and then:

Prayer: Holy Shepherd, You know Your sheep by name and lead us to safety through the valleys of death. Guide us by Your voice, that we may walk in certainty and security to the joyous feast prepared in Your house, where we celebrate with You forever.
Amen.