

“Hard Times”

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Easter 4, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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Readings

Acts 2:42–47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

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. (1 Peter 2:19–21)

Today and next Sunday, I am going to be offering you some thoughts on the letter, First Peter, and its author's insights about atonement. Next week, I'll talk for a bit about how being likened to Jesus – the stone which the builders rejected – may help us who are living stones – perhaps even rejected like he was – to build together, among ourselves a home for God. Today, I'd like to offer you some thoughts about some ways in which we may find ourselves experiencing some kind of unity with God by living the example of Jesus.

The letter which has come to be called First Peter, in its original context, may actually have been written by the apostle Peter, though that is a subject for debate among biblical scholars and not for us this morning. What is more certain is that it was directed from a writer in Rome to a church, probably in Macedonia or western Asia Minor, that was experiencing hard times. Worse than the hard times most of us go through, but undeniably related to them, they were experiencing true persecution.

They were wrestling with familiar problems.

The writer mentions people suffering for crimes they did not commit, being punished even though they were innocent. Readers of the letter are assured that they should not lose hope, but should recall the substitute sacrifice of life Jesus made on our behalf. Notably, the author does not say that the recipients' sufferings are less than those of Jesus, but that because Jesus suffered similarly, they should be as brave as he.

By having become one of us, by living and dying like one of us, our Sovereign changed the way in which Creator and creation could understand and interact with each other. By our Creator becoming part of the creation, by the Shepherd becoming one of the sheep, a gateway of access and understanding has been opened. The realm of heaven has come near.

In its unpracticed state, this is a beautiful idea, but the problem First Peter acknowledges is that the unity of deity with humanity does not go unpracticed.

Identification with Christ, which is just about the ultimate comprehension of hard times, is part of our end of the bargain when we come to faith as Christians and are baptized. What First Peter says is that we must expect this identification with Christ to mean experiencing what Jesus did, even when we haven't planned or desired it.

We have been born into a new life, and this is part of living it out. Is it redemptive for us? Who really knows? It is what it is.

First Peter advises readers that we ought to deal with the world as Jesus did. Not “what would Jesus do,” but “what *did* Jesus experience,” we ask. And we know that Jesus not only taught and preached and healed, but he also died unjustly.

That heritage, the heritage of heaven on earth, lives on. Recent history acknowledges it.

Consider the scenes of nonviolent resistance from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the anti-Apartheid movement of the 70s and 80s, and countless other efforts by faith-filled people who would not be bounded by the strictures of an earth-bound society.

During the 1990s, there were church people who wrote letters, lobbied, and demonstrated to get a living wage in the city of Chicago, who campaigned for an end to the death penalty, who

cried out against adjustments to a welfare system that, though it was admittedly flawed, at least did not force recipients into minimum-wage jobs of which they had to work as many as three or four at a time in order to support their families because nothing else was available.

In the place from which I have just come, Burlington, Wisconsin, home after home for the mentally disabled was being closed. First, practically upon my arrival, there was Lakeview Terrace, a group home for mentally ill and dually diagnosed patients on the southern shore of Browns Lake, a recreational lake there. An area developer during the heyday of the housing boom bought it from its retiring owner and evicted the 65 residents, in order to tear it down and build luxury, lakeside condominiums, each with its own boatslip.

A few months later, a residence for as many as 13 senior developmentally disabled adults, Burlington Manor, was announced to be closing for lack of sufficient government or private funding.

In both these cases, there was no safety net for their populations in the immediate vicinity. So, about 75 people lost their homes and more than 30 people lost their jobs. In my opinion and that of many other persons of faith, we saw the innocent and vulnerable being made to suffer for the sake of the continued affluence of their sisters and brothers.

I was able to rally a group of concerned citizens around the outcry for new, replacement housing for Lakeview Terrace residents, and – after more than five years – next month a new home will opened in Burlington to house six mentally ill individuals. Problem is, the people who will be in charge of the new facility are already calling out warnings to me that, if the population falls below six, the budget there is so tight that they’ll start losing money right away, and we’ll have another failed group home on our hands in almost no time. The mentally ill are the least funded of all disabled populations in the United States, as you may have been able to tell based on your own experience of panhandlers and homeless.

So, results in the latter day work of faithful people have been mixed. In addition to the evidence I’ve offered from my Wisconsin experience, Chicago passed a Living Wage ordinance something like the one we wanted for all new businesses in the city, back in 1992. The compromise bill provided that at least the wages of workers for the City and city contractors would be enough to support their families.

And there are many more examples of the baby steps we have been taking societally. Governor George Ryan ended the use of the death penalty, not because it is wrong to kill people, but because lethal injection was killing demonstrably innocent people, or at least those who were unable to receive a competent defense.

And President Clinton made good on his pledge “to end Welfare as we know it,” so we didn’t really succeed at all there. Nowadays, wage-slave parents created by the new system of welfare-to-work in 2 years time – and these are often single parents – either remain at the poverty level in order to get free child care, or else are getting slightly higher paying jobs and living on less because they no longer qualify for child care on the government’s dime, thus moving our society from one system of cyclical impoverishment to another.

To the untrained eye, the hard times may seem endless. What good, they will ask, is having a Shepherd who understands the sheep if the wolves continue coming? Isn’t the indication here that the Savior doesn’t actually save?

Is that what 2000 years of continuing hard times means? Christ, Paul, and Peter all three spoke of the eventual return of the Messiah, to redeem the suffering that has been going on here in the realm of creation, practically since it was created. Two thousand (plus!) years of waiting for that day is an awfully long time... literally. Are we to hope for no more than this?

Some have given up hope and think not. What is the point, they argue, of continuing to live as if life were so abundant that we could go on dying and dying every day?

The point is, that this is exactly how abundant life is. We find in our faithfulness that

hard times are just times. We find in our living that dying does not in fact win, but that life goes on and on, even more than dying does. So, why not follow the Messiah's example and let the world appear to defeat us? In the end, it doesn't.

In the end, whatever suffering we may endure when we practice good faith is like the suffering Jesus endured. Ultimately, such suffering is redemptive, demonstrating a depth of grace that can only be discovered in that way.

Christ, Paul, Peter, and others who founded our faith, taught and lived humility in the extreme. Each of them found in their comprehension of the faith a comparison believers to sheep – interestingly not because they go astray, as Isaiah observed, but because sheep are notoriously submissive and apparently passive creatures. We are today called to act in the same way as those first Christians did, to persevere bravely because of our desired unity with God in Christ.

That is, after all, the entire point of the Creator's oneness with the creation – the effect of the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. Death may try to overcome us, but life – eternal life – is our inheritance and our destiny.

Possessing an abundance of life, we will — as our Savior did — endure hard times, even death, to prove the power of our God.