

SermonsA17Easter4

1 Peter 2:9-25

John 10:1-10

I wonder ... were any of you feeling slightly uncomfortable as the first lesson was read this morning? In modern times, especially since World War II when over 6 million Jews and others were massacred, this text has given many people cause to reject Christianity. It was ... of course ... used by many “good” German Christians as a means of mollifying their consciences and justifying their complacency about the atrocities happening right under their noses. After all, the Bible says that you should obey the government right ... even if it’s a bad government? Then there’s that sticky part in this lesson about slaves obeying their masters. We can be sure that part was one of the favorite scriptures quoted by plantation owners in the southern part of our own United States of America. This reading from 1 Peter is not something to be taken lightly.

In fact, it wasn’t really part of the assigned reading for this morning. I guess the people who laid out the weekly lessons decided it was too messy ... not politically correct you know ... and certainly unattractive. In a day when Christianity in general and mainline Christianity in particular is in a slump we want to put our best foot forward. And, this part of 1 Peter is decidedly one of our most awkward scriptural left feet. Scriptures like this, and the way that they have been applied by people ... many of them not so very different from us ... scriptures like this have caused many people to reject Christianity entirely. In fact, if “sacred” texts like this can be used to justifying violence and abuse why bother with religion at all.

You can see why it was just sort of glossed over and quietly left out when the Revised Common Lectionary was set can’t you? Maybe you’re even wondering why in the world I added it back in today. Are you?

Well ... let me tell you why.

I added it back in and put it right under our noses because as political climates heat up all across the developed world we stand a very good chance of being confronted with some hard choices.

There is a strong likelihood that we will have to listen ... even more carefully than we do now ... to all the rhetoric. The odds are very good, I believe, that it will become difficult to sort out from all the cacophony around us ... the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us out of the comfort of the sheepfold. We are going to need to be wise and knowledgeable about scripture ... especially difficult scripture like this ... so wise that we have crystal clarity and can see when scripture is being misapplied, misconstrued and abused.

So, let's consider the reading. The first thing we have to understand about approaching volatile verses like this is that we can't just throw them out willy-nilly saying, "I don't like that part so I'm just going to pretend it isn't there." Our Lutheran confession is that *all* scripture is inspired by God and worthy for instruction in faith.

Did you hear the word *all* in that confession? I did. When we hear the word *all* we must assume that *all* means *all*. That means this text too, even though we may not like it at first, it has something to teach us ... something to help us grow in faith and understanding of God. ☞

It doesn't mean, however, that we can take the individual verses, lift them out of the whole and apply them in whatever way we choose. What we *are* going to have to do is take a step back, get more information about the context in which the text was written, then see how it fits into the whole of God's plan to reconcile the world through Christ.

So, let's turn to 1 Peter ... this letter was written to a group of early Christians living during a time when rumblings from Rome were shaking the foundations of the community. The half-crazed Roman emperor Nero, looking for scapegoats to blame the ills of his empire on, seized on the early Christians. Nero came to power in 54 AD. Peter's letter was most likely written during the reign of Emperor Domitian in 81 AD. That means that for nearly 30 years Christians lived in danger and in terror. They had some serious choices to make. Should they flee their homeland? Should they give up their faith to save their lives? Should they resist? If they should resist, how should they resist? What should their resistance look like?

Peter wrote to a people who were suffering and who faced the prospect of even more suffering. He wrote to a people who needed to know that their suffering was not in vain. He wrote to a people who were also probably angry ... too fed up with the abuse and the oppression they had suffered. Some of them, most certainly, believed they had little or nothing to lose by fighting back. Acts like suicide bombings aren't just a 20th or 21st century phenomenon.

There has always that temptation. Hopelessness in the face of oppression can easily turn to violence. Anger in the face of persecution can turn to viciousness.

Peter, writing to this marginalized and victimized group, reminds them that all of their actions ... everything they do and say ... bears witness to the Lord of Love and Life that they have chosen to follow. The entire letter is meant to remind the beloved rag-tagged and downtrodden flock that despite how everything looks on the surface ... God IS in charge. God can and will use every circumstance and every person on the face of this earth to accomplish his and her divine purpose. Even the strings of evil emperors and their minions are ultimately pulled by the All Loving and Ever Merciful Puppet Master. God will bring life out of every action on the face of the earth ... even out of the death bringing evil actions that are now causing their suffering. Peter reminds those who see and are touched by the ugliest and most intense forms of evil ... reminds them that *The Light* is always conquering the darkness. Look toward *The Light*, not the darkness he says. See *The Light*. Stay in *The Light*. Act only in *The Light of Love* ... no matter what ... no matter how ugly it is or how ugly it gets. Let your every action and every word bear witness to Christ, *The Light of the World*.

You can't properly read and understand the words of 1 Peter chapter 2 without hearing the echo of his words from chapter one:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who has

called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13-15)

Now, what does that mean for us today? What do Peter's words in this second chapter of his first letter mean in our context? Does it mean that we can sit idly by when governments act without a mind toward the wellbeing of all people? Does it mean that when people are enslaved within systems of injustice and oppression we sit quietly and comfortably by enjoying the relative peace and security that come with being in positions of privilege and prosperity? No, certainly it does not!

Peter's words remind us that when we stand up for the outcast, the oppressed, the impoverished, the marginalized in our world ... and we should stand up ... when we stand up we are to do so in ways that reflect the non-violent peacemaking manner of Christ Jesus who, when he was struck on the cheek turned the other cheek.

I have been heartened in seeing groups of people and individuals coming forward and standing up against the oppression and injustices in our society. I hope that many of us will be among them.

I have been saddened to see some of these very same groups and very same people acting and speaking maliciously and resorting to or trying to provoke acts of violence. When these groups of people and individuals fly the banner of Christianity over their heads I am even more saddened. I don't know who they are taking their instructions from and whose voice they are listening to but it is not the voice of Jesus Christ. You can be sure of that.

The media these days reports that religious activism, on the right and on the left, is on the rise. I see that here among members of our congregation. Let's encourage one another to rise up more and more. But, as we rise, let's make sure that every action we take and every word we speak shines with the gentle peacemaking light of Christ.

✠AMEN✠