

Haydenville Congregational Church

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May 15, 2011

1 Peter 2:19-25

“Two Very Important Little Girls”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Howard Thurman was an influential American philosopher, theologian, author, educator and civil rights leader. He was Dean of Theology and Dean of the Chapel at Howard University and Boston University for more than two decades, he wrote 20 books, and in 1944 he helped found a multicultural church. Howard Thurman also mentored the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In his autobiography, With Head and Heart, Rev. Thurman recalls the day he took his little daughters to Daytona Beach, where he had grown up....listen to his story:

We sauntered down the long street from the church to the riverfront. This had been the path of the procession to the baptismal ceremony in the Halifax River... At length we passed the playground of one of the white public schools. As soon as Olive and Anne saw the swings, they jumped for joy. “Look, Daddy, let’s go over and swing!” This was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face sooner or later. What do you say to your child at the critical moment of primary encounter?

“You can’t swing in those swings.”

“Why, Daddy?”

“When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you.”

When we had had our lemonade, Anne pressed for the answer, “We’re home now, Daddy. Tell us.”

I said, “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. Only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls.”

Let's keep those two very important little girls in mind as we consider our Scripture reading for today from the Book of 1 Peter. Today's passage is a difficult one and Olive and Anne might influence our thinking.

You all understand what the Lectionary is....right? The Lectionary is a calendar of Bible readings that are assigned or designated for daily study and reflection. Christian preachers are supposed to choose from one of the four Scriptural passages designated each Sunday to be the basis for the Sunday sermon. The four readings assigned for today can be found in your Bulletin on the UCC page. When you see the four choices listed for today, you can probably imagine that I was tempted to choose the Acts passage, or the 23rd Psalm, or the Gospel reading from John instead of 1 Peter. But I decided to jump into this difficult text to see if we could find something redemptive in these painful words.

When I was in divinity school, one of my preaching professors said, "Always find and preach the Good News in every text, in every sermon." That advice is hard to follow with today's reading. Peter exhorts the early Christians to endure suffering gracefully. That is difficult, even painful, for people to hear who have suffered profoundly in their lives.

What exactly is Peter is saying and why? Peter is calling his community—the early Christians—to follow the pattern set by Jesus. Jesus did not strike back when abused. He did not curse when he was cursed. He did not resort to violence, nor did he seek retaliation. Peter says that if we endure suffering with grace and strength, we receive God's approval. And Peter's language is not unique to him. Language like his is found throughout the New Testament—language about self-emptying, self-denying, and demonstrating endurance and perseverance in the face of persecution and hardship.

However, you may be sitting in these pews having suffered abuse yourself—as child or as an adult. You may be sitting here with deep scars from years of harm committed against you, maybe even by those you loved and trusted. Peter's words may make it sound like suffering is somehow acceptable, ordained, redemptive, and that anything but a submissive response to suffering is sinful.

THAT reaction that some of you may be having is precisely why this text is problematic; THAT is why we must question and wrestle with what we read in the Bible and why we must place the words in the Bible in the context of their time. Today's passage is why preachers are sometimes called to do what is known as "preaching against the text."

When I was in divinity school, a fellow student who had transferred to Yale from a more conservative seminary told us that at his former seminary he was essentially taught to take the Bible literally and preach the texts as they were written. He said he used to hear, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

But that is not how those of us in the United Church of Christ understand and interpret the Bible. As William Sloane Coffin, admired and loved UCC pastor and theologian used to say, “I love the Bible too much to take it literally.”

I cannot preach a sermon that says what Peter is suggesting is God’s plan or wish for our lives. Suffering is not to be welcomed into our lives, endured with stoicism as if it is sanctioned by God, and accepted with submission.

If we are to find the kernel of Good News in today’s reading, I would say it is this:
In this mysterious, ever-changing, challenging life each one of us is living, suffering is not GOOD...but suffering is INEVITABLE.
The Good News is that God will be right there with us to help us when we do suffer.

Each one of us will experience plenty of suffering during the course of our lifetime due to disappointments and losses, illnesses and grief, heart aches, heart breaks, worry and fear. Life includes suffering. We are not meant to suffer, but we will. Life involves suffering.

God does not will suffering on us or want us to suffer, but we do suffer.

Suffering is not good, but it is inevitable.

And what is good is that God will not leave us, God comes in close when we suffer, God is there to provide comfort, peace, solace, vision, hope and courage.

Let us reflect on the Lectionary passage from Peter again. What is interesting is that the Lectionary skips a very important line in this passage. The reading assigned for today is problematic enough but it gets worse IF you go to the Bible and read the sentence right before the passage assigned in the Lectionary. Today’s reading is 1 Peter:2 beginning with verse 19. The Lectionary editors lopped off the key opening line in the paragraph. They carefully chose PART of Peter’s advice to the early Church so that they could avoid an even more horrible line that begins the reading. Listen to 1 Peter:2 beginning with verse 18:

“Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.”

It makes you cringe. Peter is encouraging slaves, his very brothers and sisters in Christ, to acquiesce not only to their station in life but also to the abuse that comes with it. I wanted you to hear that awful verse to assure you that sometimes we are called to preach against the text.

The misguided and dangerous verses in the Bible remind us that our Holy Scriptures were written by people—people who felt close to God, people who believed their words were inspired by God, people who believed God spoke to them and worked through them. The Bible was written by people—it is not verbatim dictation from God. The Bible was written by people who lived at a certain time in history, and in a particular place in history. Our sacred text reflects the time and place it was written.

Peter, bless his heart, lived in a time when slavery was a totally acceptable practice—the society he lived in was built and depended upon the exploitation of a certain strata of people. Peter could not imagine, could not conceive of a time when slavery did not exist. And so his references to slavery reflect his acceptance of slavery and his experience of slaves. Slavery was a given in Peter's life and so he counsels slaves to accept their lot in life which includes abuse. And, he tells them, model yourselves after Jesus who was abused and courageous.

Peter could have said: Jesus' whole ministry was about liberation, justice, and the empowerment of those on the margins of society. Jesus wants you to be free, not enslaved, and not abused. But Peter conformed to the norms, laws, trends of his time and his message reflects that. He was a product of his culture and of his time.

The irony is that the overarching message in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Israelites release from slavery, their freedom from captivity in Egypt. Moses led the Hebrew people OUT of Egypt across the Red Sea, into the wilderness and eventually into the Promised Land. The liberation from slavery is the dominate message in the Hebrew Scriptures, which Peter would have grown up hearing; those are stories he would have known well. And yet Peter still conformed to the prevailing norms of his time and said: slaves accept your lot in life, including the abuse.

We know better. It is 2011. We are part of the United Church of Christ and one of the tenets of our faith is progressive revelation. We pray, study and discern the way forward as a community of faith. We put these ancient and beloved Biblical passages to the test and ask: what in our world, in our experience, in our relationship with God TODAY makes us modify, apply and understand these texts in a new way?

We have learned from the wisdom of John Wesley, leader of the Methodist movement in the 1700s, who said that our theological conclusions must be based on four things:

- What the Bible says
- Tradition (the 2000 year history of the Christian Church)
- Reason (the rational thinking and sensible interpretation we bring to the text)
- Experience (our experience of God individually and in community).

Our understanding of the Bible MUST include these four pillars...what the Bible says, tradition, reason and experience.

And so drawing upon the wisdom of those four lenses through which we interpret the Bible, I want to affirm that our God is a God of love and justice. Our God is a God who does not EVER want us to suffer. But when we do suffer, because we are human and life involves suffering, God will be near and will help. Rev. Jim Munroe, former pastor of the Episcopal Church in Northampton, used to have a plaque on his desk that read: “Jesus did not come to take away our pain, but to fill it with his presence.”

We can and we should push back against what theologian Phyllis Tribble calls “texts of terror.” The Bible says slaves should accept the authority of their master with deference, masters who are kind and those who are harsh. The Bible also says adulterers should be taken to the edge of town and stoned, animal sacrifices should be offered to God, menstruating women should be separated from daily life, and no one should wear garments made of two different materials.

But through progressive revelation we have come over to time interpret Scripture by considering what the Bible says, what our traditions say, what reason and analysis bring to bear on the text, and how our lived experience of God informs our understanding of the Good Book. And so we reject some laws and some counsel found in the Bible as misguided.

Remember Olive and Anne. They lived through some of the worst days of racial segregation in this country. Their father, the faithful and God-filled preacher Howard Thurman, did not believe the words in 1 Peter now did he conform to the culture and norms of his time. He did not tell his daughters: you cannot play on those swings because you are inferior, white children are superior and that’s our lot in life. He did not say: we suffer due to the scourge of racism but our suffering is part of God’s plan for us and we must bear it with grace.

Howard Thurman said:

“...it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls.”

If you read the Bible and it seems that God is advocating violence, suffering, exclusion, and pain...read the text again and find the Good News. Read the text remembering this sacred book of ours was written by people...and they did their best, and they inspire and teach us so much. But they were influenced by the culture and norms of their time.

When you read the Bible, remember that Jesus often spoke these words, *“You have heard it said....but I say to you...”* The *“....but I say to you”* part—that’s the Good News!

Remember who Jesus was, remember how he lived and what he modeled. Jesus’ work, words and witness were all about justice and love, inclusion and compassion, freedom and fairness. And once, years ago, two little Black girls named Olive and Anne learned that lesson from their father.

Amen.