

1 Peter 2:17-25  
April 30, 2023

Respect

Here is a piece of information you might find interesting, or trivial. It could be a Trivial Pursuit question. When I was eleven years old there was a popular song called, “Sweet Home Alabama.” I believe it remains well-known. In it there is a line, “In Muscle Shoals they got the swamper, they’ve been know to pick a song or two,”

For decades I wondered what a “swamper” was, supposing them to be a local fare band of musicians. Perhaps, when you haven’t had anything else to think about, you may also have wondered, “what is a swamper?” More than likely you haven’t cared.

It turns out that they were a collection of studio-recording artists that played the instrumentals on several popular songs in the 1960s and 70s. One such song was an Otis Redding number made popular by Aretha Franklin called, “Respect.” I am sure you have heard of that one too.

The epistle called 1st Peter was written to a group of people who were not fully integrated into the community around them. That is to say, they were outsiders, and, being outsiders, they experienced hardships.

I am willing to bet that one of the hardships they faced was the lack of respect of their neighbors. I am also willing to bet that part of their response was to return

that lack of respect. The question of the letter involves what to do, how to live in such a situation, and maintain faithfulness to God, in view of the salvation they had received? That is their historical context.

It may also be helpful to pick up some of the literary context of our reading as well, by looking at some of the preceding verses that lead up to the reading this morning.

In the eleventh verse of 1st Peter 2, we read, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

The next piece of advice addresses how to live when the larger community seems alien to us;

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves.”

It may also be helpful to think of our historical and cultural context. It bears remembering that we *are* fully integrated into our communities. It is a stretch to think

of ourselves as outsiders, either because of our faith, or anything to do with ethnicity. There does seem to be an increasing distinction between and tension with those in our community who do not share our convictions; and also with some who do.

In our time, I think it is fair to say, there has been a diminishing respect between people who find themselves in disagreement. One of the characteristics of this diminishing respect that is particularly disconcerting to me is the use of death threats. I realize some have always behaved in this way, but it seems more common now.

After 2,000 years of Christian preaching about love and forgiveness, and about the Golden Rule, to see an increase in this kind of rhetoric, is disappointing. I know I am “preaching to the choir,” but it has been found in discourse about politics and culture, and even sports; *sports*. It is something that should not be. Anyway the advice about how to live our lives faithfully is strangely similar.

That sets the stage for the text which has been read in our presence this morning. The reading in verse 17 reads like this, “show the proper respect for every person,” literally, “honor every person.” The word translated honor/respect, can also mean, “precious,” like in a “precious” stone. Think of everyone as precious.

Little comment is necessary, but the sequence in the sentence is illuminating; “love the fellowship, fear God,

respect the king,” which to us means the elected officials, and applies even when they are not the ones we voted for.

Interestingly, it is the same word, “honor, respect,” used for how every person should be treated, and for how the king, the presidents and prime ministers, should be treated. But not God, who is to be feared. If fear is too strong a word, respect is too weak; there should be a reverence, an awe, that rises above and is due only God.

The next set of verses concerns the status of the congregation, some of them were slaves, or servants; we can take it for granted that in their social world, they were more likely towards the bottom of things. The teaching is to be submissive and obedient, which we are forced to admit is not really the American way. At least the instruction is that if one is to be ill-treated, it should be for doing good, and not for doing wrong.

This admonition is reinforced by introducing the example of Jesus, who suffered unjustly.

But Christ is more than an example to follow. This text reminds us that because he entrusted himself to God, the one who judges justly, and did not retaliate when he was badly treated, his example is transformed into a reconciliation, a redemption;

“He bore our sins in his body on the tree . . . that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.”

And then Peter does what is common throughout the New Testament. He quotes from the Book of Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah is quoted more than any other book in the Jewish bible except Deuteronomy and the Psalter. He writes, “by *his* wounds, you have been healed . . . for you were like sheep going astray.”

It isn't so hard to see that whether one lived in the first century or in the 21st, or comes from the upper or the lower levels of income or status or power, or right in the middle, the characterization of lost sheep is an apt one.

The lesson we are given is that salvation, the redemption of life that is the truth of the gospel, resides *beneath* the level of our earthly circumstances, whatever they may be. There, the surface level distinctions between people disappear and we are all pretty small, pretty weak, pretty limited beings in the face of an eternity before which we shrink.

We are in need of help. But we are also precious. Through Jesus Christ, we have been given that help. Believe in that help. Embrace that help. The result is a willingness to live amicably in our present situation, as amicably as we can. It means goodness and right-doing, honesty, empathy, service and sacrifice, . . . a love for each other . . . and an awe-inspired reverence for God . . . respect for everyone. That is the legacy of Christ . . . that is our legacy.

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