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## A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter

1 St. Peter 2:18-25

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**Let slaves obey their masters with all respect, not only the good and kind ones but also the unkind ones.**

Those are jarring words, aren't they? They have been abused at times in history, shouted by masters at their slaves: "God says you're supposed to obey me and you don't want to disobey God, do you?" True words, but showing that sometimes true words, when spoken by the wrong person and in the wrong context, turn everything upside-down.

Jarring words written by St. Peter in his First Epistle—chapter 2, verse 18. The verse that leads into today's Epistle. Originally the Epistle started a few verses later. At the Reformation Archbishop Cranmer extended the Epistle to verse 19, but to really understand what Peter's saying we need to go back at least to verse 18 to those words about slaves obeying their masters.

It also helps to know that slaves were what made the Greco-Roman world go round. Ten to twenty per cent of the Roman population was slaves and without them life in Rome Empire would have ground to a halt. When we think about slavery, we probably think about race-based slavery in the United States or maybe in Latin America in the colonial era. Slavery in Rome wasn't quite the same. It wasn't based on race. Slaves were often prisoners of war or debtors or, of course, the children of slaves. They did have certain rights. They could own property and even buy their own freedom. But at its core all slavery is rooted in the idea that you are not your own; you belong to someone else. You're not a person; you're property. That slavery exists, whether

in Rome or in the Americas or in other parts of the world today, that slavery exists is a stark and profound reminder that the world is not as it should be. Slaves, as much if not more than anyone else, know the pain and the tears of the present evil age. And I think that's why Peter singles them out here.

But what does slavery have to do with Easter? Well, think back. On Easter Day the Epistle, from Paul, reminded us to look up and keep our eyes fixed on the age to come, on the new creation inaugurated by Jesus. Last Sunday we heard St. John exhorting us to overcome the world—to be stewards and heralds of God's new creation. This is all what it means to let the reality of Easter—of Jesus' resurrection—work out practically in our lives—to be Easter people. And today it's St. Peter who speaks to us on this same theme.

All through Chapter 2 of his letter Peter has been writing about who and what Jesus and the Spirit have made us: living stones, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. And he writes that God's purpose in all this is that we will "announce the virtuous deed of the one who called [us] out of darkness into his amazing light". That's our duty, Brothers and Sisters, to proclaim the mighty and saving deeds of God in Jesus. To make the good news known to the world.

But, Peter warns, don't undermine that Easter proclamation with worldly living. Here's what he writes beginning at 2:11:

**My beloved ones, I beg you—  
strangers and aliens as you are...**

Remember that when we are born again in Jesus and the Spirit, we're reborn as part of God's new creation and, even though we still await its consummation, that makes us in a very real sense strangers and aliens in the world we once knew. The old evil age has been defeated, but it still trundles on even as the new age is breaking in, but that old age no longer has a claim on us. We belong to Jesus. We belong to God's new world. And it is this new world and it's king, Jesus that we proclaim. But we also need to *live* this new world too

and that's what Peter's getting at. So he goes on:

**I beg you to hold back from the fleshly desires that wage war against your true lives. Keep up good conduct amongst the pagans, so that when they speak against you as evildoers they will observe your good deeds and praise God on the day of his royal arrival. (1 Peter 2:11-12)**

Brothers and Sisters, our walk needs to match our talk. We have been delivered from sin's slavery, but the old temptations are still there. That's why we vowed in our baptism to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil. You and I belong to a royal priesthood and a holy nation. We ought to live holy lives, putting our sinful desires to death. And we do that not just because it's the right thing to do, but because it is part of our Gospel witness. This is what it means to be light in the darkness.

Peter knew the world needed gospel light. As bad as we think our world might be, the ancient world was worse. Unspeakable sin was everywhere. The sexual immorality of our world doesn't hold a candle to the sexual immorality of ancient Greece and Rome. And idolatry was woven through every bit of life. To become a Christians meant withdrawing from all of that, which meant the pagans looked on Christians as impious traitors. The pagans called Christians atheists, because to worship only one god was pretty much as good as atheism. They accused Christians of being unpatriotic, because Christians refused to worship the emperor. If disaster befell a city, the pagans would blame the Christians for angering the gods. And yet Peter reminds these brothers and sisters that the pagans would also notice how different they were. In a dog-eat-dog world, these Christians treated each other as equals and they loved each other. They even pooled their resources to care for widows and orphans—the cast-offs of Greco-Roman society. In a world of sexual filth, the Christians lived lives of purity. The Christians became known for adopting the infants—especially the newborn girls—left to die of exposure by the pagans. The Christians treated women and slaves as equals of free men.

In other words, the Christians were living out as best they could God's new creation in the midst of the old. They were lifting the veil on God's future, on the day when everything is set to rights, and giving the pagans a glimpse of it. And the pagans couldn't help but take note, even as they threw all their accusations at the Christians. Some of the pagans—especially those deeply invested in the evils of this world—they lashed out, they fought back and Christians were thrown into prison and martyred. But even then, their witness had an impact and a few at first, but then more and more and more were drawn to Jesus through their holy witness—not just the proclamation, but by the lives of these Christians—by faith in Jesus put into practice. And the world began to change. New creation spread.

So Peter goes on in verses 13-17:

**Be subject to every human institution, for the sake of the Lord: whether to the emperor as supreme, or to the governors as sent by him to punish evildoers and praise those who do good. This, you see, is the will of God. He wants you to behave well and so to silence foolish and ignorant people. Live as free people (though don't use your freedom as a veil to hide evil!), but as slaves of God. Do honour to all people; love the family; reverence God; honour the emperor.**

So, Brothers and Sisters, so much as we are able—without compromising our gospel principles—we are to keep the peace. Peter knew that God is sovereign and that he establishes human rulers in this world to keep the peace, to punish evil, and to promote the good. He knew that those rulers are often far from perfect. Peter even knew that those rulers are often evil. However much you may have thought that Justin Trudeau was the worst Prime Minister ever, however much you may think Donald Trump is totally unworthy of the Presidency, the Roman Emperors were worse—far, far, far worse. Our governments in the West, for all their flaws and even as they forsake the gospel, have been profoundly shaped by that gospel. That could not be said of

Caesar. And yet even as Nero would light up his garden parties by setting Christians on fire, Peter acknowledged that—generally speaking—God has appointed such men—as we pray—to administer justice, restrain wickedness and vice, and uphold integrity and truth. So Peter warns Christians to be subject to our earthly rulers. Jesus has not called us to be violent revolutionaries bent on overthrowing Caesar so that we can impose a theocracy. Instead, God wants us to “behave well” and in that to silence the accusations of the pagans. Show honour to all, love our family (he means the church), and honour the emperor. You don't have to get into idolatry or offer incense to Caesar to be submissive to his God-given authority.

You can see how this actually did work if you look at the history of the early church. Those early Christians lived peaceably. They refused to compromise. They refused to participate in idolatry and in sexual immorality and it cost them, but they lived as truly gospel people. Many of them were martyred for doing so. And you might think that killing people would put an end to a movement. But this quiet, peaceful, holy living worked. It gradually silenced the accusations of the pagans, who gradually and increasing numbers were drawn to the good news and to Jesus.

Here's the thing. We know that the world is not as it should be. In our anger we often want to lash out ourselves, if not to make it right, at least to make it right for ourselves or to get some kind of revenge. And that only makes things worse. But as those first Christians lived peaceable and godly lives, as the pagans came to Jesus in faith, the world began to change through their influence. Gradually the gross sexual immorality disappeared, infanticide and abortion stopped, the brutality of the gladiatorial games ended, the status of women and children rose, and slavery came to an end.

Brothers and Sisters, the gospel changes the world through humble, peaceable, and holy Christians as it quietly works its way through a nation until that people or nation itself becomes a

witness to Jesus and gospel. We really need to hear this lesson today. Those first Christians had no other choice. They were a minority. They had no political power. We, however, living in a world that was once Christian and where Christianity is now in decline and out of fashion, we keep trying to regain it all through political power—forgetting, I think, that the gospel doesn't work that way. It rises up from below, from the ranks of peaceable, humble, and godly people who proclaim and live it. We will never overcome the accusations and rejection of the pagans by trying to force the gospel on them. Rather, they will be drawn to the gospel through our gospel proclamation backed up by our gospel living.

And this is where Peter says those startling words:

**Let slaves obey their masters with all respect, not only the good and kind ones but also the unkind ones.**

Did Peter know that one day the influence of the gospel would put an end to slavery? I don't know. Slavery was a given in his world. But Peter knew that slavery was not God's plan for human beings. He knew that it had no place in God's new creation. And yet he tells slaves—and it's not like he was just writing this to slaves he didn't know in far away churches, there were surely slaves in Peter's home church, brothers and sisters he loved dearly to whom he said the same thing face to face—Peter tells slaves to obey their masters—even the evil ones. And I think that's hard for us to hear, because in our world, this sounds like Peter is colluding with injustice. One of the slogans of our post-modern age is “Silence is violence”. You have to speak out against evil and injustice. But Peter was perfectly aware that slavery was an injustice, so let's bear with him.

Consider that Peter lived the gospel story very literally. He was one of the first Jesus called. He spent three years being disciplined by Jesus. He was there when Jesus was arrested. Remember, he was the one who lashed out, drawing his sword, cutting of one of the soldier's

ears, putting up a fight for Jesus. He heard Jesus telling him to put his sword away and he saw Jesus heal that soldier. And he was there when Jesus was on trial and he was the one who denied knowing Jesus three times. He was there when they crucified him. And he was there with John on Easter morning to see the empty tomb and later that day to meet the risen Jesus. Peter knew that story. It was as much his story as it was Jesus's story, even if Jesus was the centre of it. Peter knew what it looked like to bear with injustice and suffering. He'd seen Jesus do it. And because Jesus bore with it, because Jesus refused to respond with violence, because Jesus had submitted to death on a cross, everything had changed. If Jesus hadn't submitted to death, he never would have risen victorious over it and God's new creation would never have been born.

Brothers and Sisters, that's how God's new creation, how his redemption works: Sin and death did their worst, and Jesus and the gospel rose triumphant. And what Peter is saying is that we, as Jesus' people, need to inhabit that same story, make it our own, be willing to suffer and even to die if it comes to that, so that the world can know the power of the gospel—of the good new of Jesus crucified and risen.

That's why Peter goes on like he does in verse 21, where he says:

**This, after all, is what came with the terms of your call.**

In other words, this is what you're going to be called to do, this is the life you're going to be called to live when you take up with Jesus in faith. You're going to have to inhabit his story. And to make sure we understand what that story is Peter writes what was probably a hymn sung in those early churches.

**The Messiah, too, suffered on your behalf, leaving behind a pattern for you so that you should follow the way he walked. He committed no sin, nor was there deceit in his mouth. When he was insulted, he did not insult in return, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he gave himself up to**

**the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might be free from sins and live for righteousness. It is by his wounds that you are healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your true lives.** (1 Peter 2:21-25)

The crucifixion of Jesus was the most evil and unjust act in history. Jesus was the one man who deserved nothing but praise and honour and glory, but his own people rejected him, mocked him, beat him, and crucified him. In Jesus, Peter saw the fulfilment of God's promises through the Prophet Isaiah. God's royal servant would fulfil his purposes to save the world, but he would do so by submitting to injustice. The servant would be insulted, without responding with insults of his own. He would suffer without casting curses on his torturers. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross" and "we were going astray like sheep" writes Peter, drawing from Isaiah 53. Jesus took on himself the punishment his people deserved. Because he was Israel's Messiah, the king and the world's true Lord, he could represent Israel and the rest of us in a way no one else ever could.

So with that in mind—with this idea that each of us is called to inhabit the gospel story of the cross and the resurrection—I think we can understand what Peter is getting at when he tells slaves to submit to their masters and for everyone to be subject to earthly rulers. He's not just saying that we should passively accept suffering and violence and injustice. What he's saying is that when you and I suffer for the sake of gospel, for the sake of goodness, truth, and beauty, that Jesus' suffering is somehow extended through us, and the saving and life-giving power of his death and resurrection meets this present evil age and its people with transforming power. It's not an easy thing to do. Knowing Peter and how impetuous he was, I expect he struggled with this, but he knew. The flesh cries out "No!". The flesh wants to push back—to return insult for insult, to get revenge on those

who wrong us. The flesh doesn't want to wait for the gospel to act like yeast in a lump of dough—slowly working its way through. We want justice now! We dismiss the way of suffering, saying that it fails to confront evil, insisting that only power, force, and violence can right the world's wrongs—or at least the wrongs perpetrated against us personally. And this is precisely why we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and his cross, remembering that his death and resurrection are at the centre of everything. Remembering that the unjust suffering of God's people is caught up in the suffering of Jesus his son and all part of the same redeeming story.

Brothers and Sisters, *this* is how the world is set to rights. We think revolution comes by taking up arms and by fighting back, but all that does is replace one evil with another. The real revolution took place at the cross and it spreads as you and I take up our crosses and follow Jesus. It's hard. We want vindication. We want justice. We want the world set to rights. But there is no better way to remember that God has promised us all these things than to live out that future in the here and now.

Let's pray: Almighty God, who gave your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always receive with thankfulness the immeasurable benefit of his sacrifice, and daily endeavour to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for evermore. *Amen.*