

**“What Would Your Mother Want You to Do?”**

**New London UMC**

**I Peter 2:1-10 *NRSV***

**Mother’s Day Sunday, May 10, 2020**

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Early in Grade School my Sunday School teachers used the King James Version of the Bible. And since there are relatively few passages in the Bible that are about children in general, the King James version of Mark 10:13-14 has stayed with me:

*And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them; and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.”*

The phrase “suffer the little children” has stayed engrained in my mind. NOW I know that it didn’t really mean that children should suffer. That it was just King Jamesy language to say, “let the children come,” but in my childhood ears it sounded like the children were going to be miserable by the time they actually got close to Jesus. And that the kids would continue suffering in the kingdom of God. . . . So that sounded scary to me then. And I have to admit it *still* sounds scary to me.

I should also admit that today’s scripture passage from First Peter sounds scary to me. It is scary to me because I know it has been both mis-used and misunderstood by a number of people – including a number of clergy people who have pointed to it when counseling folks who were in abusive relationships – as if this passage condoned the suffering that they were going through. They added to the harm inflicted on people who were already in pain, instead of helping them. And I find that to be very scary.

But I know that what is usually missing in that scary interpretation of this biblical passage is verse 18. It is also not included in the lectionary reading for this week. But I think once you hear it you will understand how it frames this passage of scripture. Verse 18 says:

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

OK – this is about slaves and masters. If you were hearing this and you were both a follower of Christ AND a slave, then verses 19 and 20 make more sense:

*For 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.*

Slaves can’t control their master. Nor can slaves control how they are treated by their master. Slaves can only control their own reaction to their master. So if a slave was a follower of Christ, their spirit would be free, and they could understand that the way they chose to accept their master’s authority could be an opportunity to witness to their faith.

They were in control of their response to their master, and they could respond as a follower of Christ. . . . This didn't mean that it was RIGHT for their master to be harsh, or to unjustly punish or beat them. But in their pain, a slave who was a follower of Christ could remember that Christ had also endured unjust suffering; and that Christ's Spirit would be with them to help sustain them through their own suffering. To be reminded that they were not alone in that pain, to be encouraged that Christ would endure the suffering with them – that could have made all the difference in the world to them.

And that can still make all the difference to us when there is no escape from the pain that we are in. When there are no other medical options to treat a disease our loved one has, or that we have. When a storm blows apart a home, a business, a school, a church, a town – leaving nothing but debris. When flood waters cover fields and pastures throughout an entire growing season. When bombs explode and rip people apart. . . . When there is any unjust suffering we need to be reminded that we are not alone in that pain, that Christ is with us, that God knows what we are going through.

It is also good to be reminded of how we can respond to someone else's suffering. For example, I am thinking of a story about Harry Burn. At the age of 22, Harry became the youngest member of the state legislature in Tennessee. Two years later the eyes of the country were on the Tennessee House of Representatives as they debated the proposed 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The state Senate had already voted in favor, and if the House of Representatives did the same then the amendment would have the required support of 36 states to ratify it. Suffragists had been campaigning long and hard for 52 years. Suffragists packed into the capitol carrying signs, and wearing yellow roses and sashes. There had been intense lobbying and debate within the House of Representatives, and a motion to table the amendment was defeated with a 48-48 tie.

On the morning of August 18, 1920, the day they would vote on ratifying the amendment, Representative Harry Burn pinned a red rose to his lapel to show his opposition to the amendment. When he got to the state capitol he received a note from his mother, Phoebe Ensminger Burn. In her note she wrote:

*Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt. I notice some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet.*

She concluded her note by imploring her 24 year old son to: “be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the ‘rat’ in ratification.” She was referring to the well-known suffragist leader, Carrie Chapman Catt.

As the roll was called on the amendment vote, Harry Burn still wore his red rose – but with his mother's note clutched in his hand, he voted “aye” – and broke what was

expected to be a deadlocked tie vote. With his vote the amendment was approved. And Harry Burn had to flee to the attic of the state capitol to escape from an angry mob of anti-suffragist lawmakers who threatened to rough him up.

It wasn't until the next day when Harry Burn was able to stand up and defend his last-minute reversal in a speech to the assembly. He said, "I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify." He also credited his mother's influence on his decision by saying, "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."

*(Adapted from, HISTORY Stories, "The Mother Who Saved Suffrage: Passing the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment," by Jennie Cohen)*

Sometimes we need to be reminded that other people are suffering – whether they are suffragists, slaves, or children who need to see Jesus – we can choose how we will respond to their suffering. As followers of Christ we can provide a witness to our faith in the face of unjust suffering. . . . All we need to remember is what Christ would do, and what our own mother would want us to do.

Amen.