

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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April 13, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

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The Cost of Discipleship

1 Peter 2:19-25

Nowadays, most of us think of Christian discipleship in terms of church membership. You know we go to church on Sunday, we give some money to the church. We raise our kids in worship and Sunday School. We send them to Youth Fellowship and so on. Maybe, if we're really involved, we serve as a Sunday School teacher or even as an officer in the church. So, when someone talks about discipleship, we think in terms of being a member of a church. And when someone mentions the cost of discipleship, we reach for our wallets, not to pull something out of them, mind you, but to make sure they're still where they're supposed to be. Christian discipleship seems to be linked in our minds to being a member of a church.

So what are we to do with this passage of Scripture? What's with this talk of suffering and living under the authority of our master, and so on? To begin, these are words directed at slaves in the first century. They are instructions for how Christians should behave in regard to social or cultural realities they cannot change. In short, they teach us how we should relate to the world out there, not the world in here, when the world out there is hostile. But they are not general instructions for Christian behavior in all situations.

For example, Christian teachers, this is how you should behave if your principal is not very nice. Students, this is how you should behave if your teacher picks on you. Employees, this is how you should behave if your boss treats you poorly. However, if you are in an abusive relationship, if your husband or wife, your boyfriend or girlfriend abuses you or one of your children, you are NOT required to tolerate that. Further, if your principal, your teacher, or your employer should be abusive toward you, there is no merit in suffering silently. Indeed, I believe you should get out of that relationship as soon as possible.

The purpose behind these instructions was very simply Christian survival in a setting where believers had no real opportunity to change things. Early Christians were called upon to coexist peacefully with the larger society because failing to do so would call attention to them as a troublesome group. And the authorities in those days were no more favorable toward a troublesome group than authorities are today. So even if Peter and the other disciples thought slavery should be outlawed – and let it be clear we have no evidence to suggest they did – even if we could demonstrate that the early church believed slavery to be wrong – and again, we cannot demonstrate that – nevertheless, for the early church to have advocated the abolition of slavery would have been understood as something like a slave rebellion. The church itself might have been destroyed.

No wonder then, that Peter and the other apostles advised Christians who were also slaves, not to create trouble, not to run away or rebel against their masters, even if their masters were cruel. Instead they invited them to suffer the indignities of slavery as Christ suffered the indignity of crucifixion. The key here, I believe, is whether you can realistically bring change to the situation. Employees ordinarily do not have to continue working in an abusive environment. Students and teachers ordinarily do not have to put up with an abusive school administration. And husbands and wives clearly are not required to remain in an abusive relationship. Thus these words are not directed to them.

But what if you are faced with a situation you have no power to change? What if, for example, you are a prisoner of war? Or, closer to home for many of us, what if you are suffering a debilitating illness? What then?

In that case, Peter's instruction becomes quite interesting from a spiritual perspective. Although it may be hard to imagine, think this way. Picture that situation as in some mysterious way, God's will for you. I know. That's not the way we want to think. And I certainly don't counsel people that way very often. Nevertheless, if you are suffering in a situation beyond your control, look to the way Jesus suffered as an example of how you should handle that situation. No, that does not mean you should be stoic and tolerate the pain. Jesus quoted the psalms and prayed diligently for God to sustain him through that most difficult time.

As an example, if you were a prisoner of war, instead of focusing your anger against your captors, imagine what it might be like to see your situation as in some mysterious way in God's hands. In short, imagine that you are God's captive, that you would not be there but for the will of God. Then call upon God for help.

Hear me out, please. I am not suggesting that we should tell someone who is suffering that it is God's will they suffer. That is entirely inappropriate for me or anyone else to do. No one should presume to tell another how he or she should understand such difficult times. However, I invite you to consider this: if you find yourself in such a situation and you choose to see your suffering as somehow in God's hands, if you can see your suffering in the light of Christ's suffering, you might have a profoundly different attitude. And such a radical shift in understanding might just be the powerful spiritual strength to see you through.

Perhaps you remember Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister and professor at the American University in Beirut who was kidnapped and held hostage by the Islamic Jihad in the early 1980's. After his release someone asked him what he first thought when he realized he was being kidnapped. His reply was quite a surprise. He said that while they were stuffing him into the back seat of the car and covering him with a blanket he was thinking, "Well Lord, this is a new experience." Now, I confess that I probably would not think something like that if I were in his shoes. Nevertheless, because he was able to see his kidnapping and his time as a prisoner as being in God's hands, and not in the hands of his captors, he was able to look to Jesus for guidance. And he was able to withstand that horrible ordeal, even making friends with his captors, telling them the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

About this Scripture, John Calvin wrote: "There are then three things to be noticed in this passage. The first is, that Christ by his death has given us an example of patience; the second, that by his death he restored us to life; it hence follows, that we are so bound to him, that we ought cheerfully to follow his example. In the third place, he refers to the general design of his death, that we, being dead to sins, ought to live to righteousness."¹

Being a disciple of Christ is far more than being a church member. It involves modeling our lives after Jesus, especially in the most difficult times. Discipleship is not cheap. It costs us our very lives. For we are called even in the most difficult situations to imitate Christ, to suffer as he did, to understand that God is in control even of those situations that we can't quite imagine as being in God's will. For Benjamin Weir it meant enduring his captivity as Jesus endured his suffering. For someone in the throws of a deadly illness it might mean trusting that illness is in God's hands, not in the hands only of the Doctors and Nurses. For all of us, regardless of our situation, being a disciple of Christ means trusting that the God who was faithful to Jesus, raising him from the dead, will be likewise faithful to us, guiding us through even the most difficult times in our lives.

¹ Calvin's Commentaries, 1 Peter 2, as quoted in the Accordance Software program for Macintosh Computers.