

Holy Nonconformists
A Sermon on 1 Peter 1:13-25
Third Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2017

Introduction

This is the second in a six-week series on 1 Peter. I will call the author Peter, even though the letter was likely written a few decades after Peter was crucified in Rome, because that is what the author calls himself. Peter begins the letter by addressing the new Christians in churches across Asia Minor as the chosen resident aliens of the Diaspora. Last week's text was a long thanksgiving that praised God for giving these people a part in God's story. They have a new identity as holy people of God.

This week we will explore the question, What do holy people do? Or in more contemporary language, What does it mean to be church today?

Our attendance has dropped in the last year. We shouldn't feel like the Lone Ranger. It is happening in churches all across America. Every Disciples minister I know has the same problem. People are turning away from church because of the conduct of the people in the church. We [and I use that broadly, I am not singly you folks out], we act as if our faith doesn't really matter to us. Not enough to shape our lives. Not enough to suffer for it.

Church matters to Peter. It does change people's lives.

First Move: Hope and Be Holy

Peter turns today to the meat of the letter. He begins with an exhortation to live a life of holiness.

There are three imperatives in today's text: hope, be holy, and love. Gene Boring, a Disciples New Testament scholar, says that the imperative degenerates into moralism without the indicative of God's act. That sounds like seminary talk so let me break it down. Don't tell people what they should do, show them. Throughout today's text, Peter exhorts the new Christians what to do by showing them what God is like, what God has done in history.

The first imperative is to hope. We can hope because God has acted definitively. Now that you have been touched by the grace of God, look at the world with confidence. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead in the middle of the story,

God at the end of the story will bring salvation to all people through the return of Christ. Parousia is Paul's word for it. Peter calls it the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Trusting in God's promise gives the new Christians hope in the present that God is still at work writing the story.

Hope for Peter is not one quality among many but the definitive term that characterizes Christian life. This hope is not the heavenly reward of selfish pietism or the positive thinking of pop psychology. Christian hope finds its basis in a changed life. The hope is not for the return of Christ but to live in hope based on this promise.

Peter uses two participles to modify this hope. They are usually translated as imperatives: gird up the loins of your minds and be self-controlled. Gird up your loins is Exodus imagery. It recalls the Passover story, when the Hebrew slaves were waiting in their homes, preparing to leave Egypt as soon as the Lord called them. Gird your loins means to gather up the lower parts of your robes, the parts that cover your lower legs, and tie them around your waist so you will be ready to travel. It is the image of a person beginning a journey on foot. The second participle, being self-controlled, means to control your desires, which are self-centered unless you train yourself to let go of your own desires. Prepare your mind to respond to God's desires.

The second imperative is, Be holy yourselves in all conduct. The indicative is the quotation from Scripture in the letter: "Be holy, as I am holy." It is from the Holiness Code in Leviticus. Being holy is not something that the new Christians can achieve on their own. God makes things holy by choosing them and setting them apart for God's saving purposes. God imparts some of God's own holiness to them. Show yourselves in your daily conduct what you have been made by God's act.

The imperative to be holy is qualified by two participles that can also be translated as imperatives: The first: "Not being conformed to the former ignorance of your desires." Peter asks the new Christians not to look down upon others but to look back on their former lives. The contrast is not with nonbelievers but with themselves. Don't be holier than thou. Instead be holier than you were before. The new Christians were Gentiles. Ignorance refers to their previous world and its values.

Being holy for these Gentiles means being a nonconformist. Conduct yourselves as a holy nonconformist. Holiness is reflected in a changed way of life.

The new Christians have been converted by listening to the word. Peter tells them they are children of obedience. Obedience sounds harsh and archaic to us. It comes from the Greek verb, to hear. Literally, it means to listen under. Sitting under a word and submitting ourselves to its claims on us. Listening is already obedience; to hear the word of God is to be changed by it. Disobedience is refusal to listen, because we know that if we listen, we may be changed.

Peter refers to the new Christians as children of obedience. Through faith these Christians have been born again. They are infants in the Christian way of life.

Second Move: Imitate God

For us to be holy is to imitate how God has been holy toward us. Fred Craddock says that to pattern our conduct on God means we must begin by reflecting on the nature of God.

What does Peter say about God? Three things in today's text. First, you must call on God as father. We are taught in seminary to avoid using father as a metaphor for God. It is sexist and patriarchal. Yes, but we also have to remember that it is how Jesus and Paul called on God: Abba, Father. It signified a special, intimate relationship for them. God's love was very real and very personal for them. We can balance the image of God as father without feminine images of God. We can't just stop using it without losing part of Jesus and Paul's relationship with God.

Second, Peter portrays God as a judge. God is the one who impartially judges according to each one's deed. God as judge is another image that contemporary Christians like to avoid. It seems to violate the Sermon on the Mount: Judge not lest you be judged. When we talk about judging people, we usually mean criticizing or labeling them. We still have values. We are rejecting the values of the culture and embracing God's values. We have to make value judgments. Judgment requires distinguishing right from wrong and holding up a standard for expectations. You can't be disappointed with someone's performance unless you first tell them what you expect. A person cannot be a good parent and demonstrate love for his or her children without making moral and ethical demands on them. That is the problem with many of the children that Mary sees in Mother's Day Out. Their parents don't want to restrict them or stifle them in any way so they give them too little guidance.

Live in fear of God as judge. Fear in Greek can also be translated as reverence and awe. Live in awe of God who is the Lord of all life. Live in awe of the goodness and beauty that our ancestors in faith saw in God and testified to in the Bible.

The third thing that Peter says about God: God through Christ has ransomed us from our former way of life. This image has roots in the Old Testament: a redeemer is a family member who pays the debts of another family member. If the family member had been sold into slavery, the redeemer frees them from slavery. It came to mean being set free from sin. The new Christians are freed from the sins that they soaked up from their culture. Jesus' blood ransoms them from their former way of life. Jesus is described as a Passover lamb, unblemished and spotless. Exodus 12:5

instructed the Jews to celebrate the Passover each year by slaughtering a lamb without blemish. Passover was a celebration of the liberation of Israel from slavery.

The third imperative: love one another without ceasing. The new birth of Christians makes them a brotherhood. They are called to be part of a family that cares for and supports each other.

Love represents the deepest convictions of Peter about the nature of the Christian life. A community of mutual love and support sets the church apart from the nations around it.

The imperative to love one another is modified by two participles. The first is purifying your souls in obedience to the truth. The goal of purification or sanctification for Peter is not the remaking of the social order, what today we call social justice, but loving your sisters and brothers in the church. The purpose of purifying the soul is that you may have genuine brotherly love. It is already theirs. Love for their new brothers and sisters is a given on conversion.

Fred Craddock says that we have to be careful in talking about the church as family. The nuclear family may not be a good image for church. To say we are a church family sounds warm and cozy to us, but it also can mean that we look alike, sound alike, and vote alike.

The second participle that modifies love one another is being born again, not from perishable seed but from the word of God, which endures into the ages. The word that we get from the culture is just noise. It is like grass that dries up and blows away. There is nothing more ephemeral than news about politics, that focuses on each day's power struggle. If we listen to the word of God, it changes us and fills us with love for our new community.

Third Move: Embody the Sermon on the Mount

I can't think of any word that sets us apart more radically as resident aliens than the Sermon on the Mount. John Dear will be coming to us this week to talk about it. I hope you can hear him, either Thursday evening at the annual dinner for the Oklahoma Coalition Against the Death Penalty or Friday over the lunch hour when he will speak here about his new book, *The Beatitudes of Peace*. I think it is hard to listen to John speak and not be changed.

The Sermon on the Mount changed Gandhi. He read it every day. It reinforced the virtue of *ahimsa* in Hinduism and Jainism. *Ahimsa* means "not to injure, do no harm." Ahimsa was the moral force behind Gandhi's nonviolent resistance in South Africa and India. It has inspired countless non-violent resistance movements in the last century.

The Sermon on the Mount changed Martin Luther King. Loving your enemy and turning the other cheek was at the center of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King and his followers were willing to take suffering into their own bodies without striking back.

The Sermon on the Mount changed Mennonites and Quakers. They are historic peace churches. Mennonites since their founding nearly 500 years ago have refused to take oaths or participate in wars. Quakers were among the first to reject slavery; they were founders of the Underground Railroad. Mennonites and Quakers suffered from persecution from Christians because of their commitment to the word of God.

John Dear will talk about what Oklahoma would look like if it became a culture of nonviolence. What would happen to our criminal justice system? Our prisons would empty. Only the violent offenders who are threats to public safety would be separated from society, not in jails but in dormitories. We would stop imposing harsh, punitive sentences. No more an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We would see the humanity of the offender and seek to heal them and remove any obstacles to their reentering the workplace. We would fund treatment facilities to address the mental-health crisis.

How would a culture of nonviolence change our spirituality? It would change the way we spoke to each other. We would be less defensive and judgmental. If we know that our brother or sister is angry with us, we would go back and be reconciled with them before we laid our offering on the altar. When we are criticized, we would be patient and listen, trying to draw out our accuser and make an emotional connection with them instead of reflexively justifying our own actions.

When we pray, we would go to our closet and pray to our father in secret. We would not babble as the Gentiles do. We would pray without words. We would leave our own thoughts and desires behind in a cloud of forgetting. We would open ourselves up to God and try to connect with God through our hearts instead of our minds, stripping away everything except a naked desire for God.

How would a culture of nonviolence change our churches? As Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon suggest in *Resident Aliens*, we would be a colony of nonviolence in a land of violence. We hear God's story in worship each week and praise God for making us part of that story. We become part of a journey that began long before us and will continue long after us. We focus on right living rather than right thinking. We come to know Jesus by following Jesus. Then we become a city on a hill. We let our light shine so that other people will be drawn to it. People will see that the Christians in our churches are Christ-like. Then people will be drawn to church.

The Sermon on the Mount exhorts us to be nonviolent because God is like that. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. God loves everyone, not just the ones who love him. God's goodness and mercy far exceed our capacity to understand.

Conclusion

What do holy people do? They place their hope in Jesus. They are holy in all their conduct because they are imitating Jesus. They love one another because God first loved them. They take their values from the enduring word of God.

They know they will suffer for clashing with the values of the culture, but they take joy in their suffering. We will talk about that suffering next week.

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