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In Our Right Place

1 Peter 1:13-23

Today the scripture passage from 1 Peter is written to a people who find themselves in a strange land. 1 Peter doesn't mean a literal strange land, but instead is talking to people who find themselves suffering and out of control of their own lives. The Christians addressed here are not able to go and do as they wish and they are subject to authority that tells them what they must do, and doesn't ask how they feel about it. The author reminds these Christians – and us - that through Christ they have been given new life – reborn – and so now Christians hold to a hope in the midst of suffering that is secure because God gives it. So, 1 Peter writes, because of our faith, Christians are to “rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith . . . may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribably and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” [1 Peter 1:6-9] 1 Peter calls for loving submission and obedience in times of suffering and trial.

We live in a culture where this passage of Scripture only gets air time in Christian Churches that major in strong authoritarian and typically all male leadership. And, this passage has been used to tell a lot of people to be obedient and to stop resisting injustice. So, as one of those against whom this letter has been weaponized, it is easy to resist the call here to live holy and obedient lives in the midst of sufferings and loss of control. The American way is to assert our power and to demand control, NOT to hold the image of obedient and loving children as our highest goal. And this pandemic has put us all – the whole earth – in a place that is foreign to many – a place we don't like and don't want – a place of limits, suffering, anxiety and loss of control.

But today, the truth of Scripture holds up a mirror in which we can see ourselves clearly, and the reflection is not flattering. Scripture says that we are to be holy because the God we love is holy. We are to conduct ourselves with reverence while we live in this strange and alien time. Because we love God, we do not act as though our own agendas, needs and desires are the most important thing. But because we know how much God loves us and because we love God in return, we live in truth, humility, reverence and love – IN THE MIDST of suffering, loss of control and anxiety.

When it comes to children, there are two ways to get obedience. Children will be obedient – at least outwardly – if they are forced, threatened or afraid to be disobedient. Fear is a great motivator of obedience. Many of us are obedient to the law because we are afraid of getting caught and punished. When children are obedient out of fear, they may be outwardly compliant, but are inwardly rebellious. There is no peace, acceptance, or love in their obedience. Instead, as soon as the threat of punishment is gone, they demand their own way and will impose their own will on others in whom they can

generate fear. This is how abuse works in families. The parent enforces outward obedience through threat of harm, and the child learns that she can also get what she wants by threatening those under her control. 1 Peter has often been used that way – to force the will of those in power on those without power. I know a good bit about being told to stay in my place and be obedient. And black and brown people in this country know more than I do about how unjust authority clothes itself in gospel language to do violence. But that sort of forced obedience is not what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about. That is not Christian obedience.

But there is another path to obedience, and that is the obedience that grows out of love and humility. Obedience that is the result of the love of a child for the one in authority, a trust in the one in authority is immediately and clearly different from obedience that grows out of fear. Obedience out of fear only generates anger, resentment and more fear. Obedience that comes from love and humility grows relationship, trust and love.

But what we can see so clearly in children, 1 Peter invites us to see in ourselves today. As we face the limitations and loss of control that mark this strange land, 1 Peter challenges us. “Since you call upon a Father who judges all people according to their actions without favoritism, you should conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your dwelling in a strange land.” (v. 17) So – Christian – take a good long hard look at what we see in the mirror. What do we see when we look at ourselves in the mirror of 1 Peter?

Do we see a child of God who trusts in and accepts the love of a God who is even now working for our salvation and for our good? Do we see a person who accepts limits willingly and in a spirit of love? Or do we see a child of God who does not trust in the goodness of God, but who demands our own way and chafes at any limits?

The Christians I have seen on the news holding signs protesting any limits on their freedom and rights, and holding signs that say “Jesus is my vaccine” are – in my opinion – only using the language of the Gospel to justify their own willful, disobedient, self-referential desires. They reveal that they are not willing to be reverentially obedient to anyone but themselves, and the fruit of that type of “obedience” is always violence and force.

But, we are called to be so set apart by our “obedience to the truth” so that we have “genuine affection.” Our lives are to be marked by deep and true love – the kind that shows the world that we trust in a God who already loves us and knows our sufferings and is now and will always work for our salvation. So, we can suffer and at the same time love. We can accept limits, because we know the peace that comes from accepting our place as children of God – not believing that we are God ourselves.

And, on this Sunday after Earth Day, I am convinced that this fundamental call to loving and reverent obedience is the theological dirt out of which grows our understanding of how we are related to every part of God’s creation – human, animal and element.

This last Wednesday was Earth Day. And normally this church would be celebrating in a big way. We were going to have lots of exhibitors and animals here today. And we had made plans to have a blessing of the animals this afternoon. A group from FLPC was going to attend a rally at the State House last Wednesday afternoon to let our lawmakers know that the Faith Community in Columbia wants our government to care for the Earth that God has made.

So today, 1 Peter invites us to think about how holy, reverent, loving Christians find our place alongside Creation, instead of demanding our rights, taking from the earth what we need by force and putting our own wants ahead of the rights of all else – other nations, other creatures and the very earth that sustains our lives.

I submit to you that precisely because we know that God loves us and has saved us and is working even now – in this time of suffering – to purify us in love – because of that we gladly and humbly claim our right place alongside creation. We do not use or collect all we can, regardless of the effects on others. In reverent and holy obedience, we are willing to do with less if that serves the needs of others and of creation. We do not demand lower prices on every good that we want, even if it means that rivers are polluted and air made unfit to breathe in poorer communities and nations.

This pandemic has shown the world the remarkable resilience of God's creation. When the virus shut down our unlimited need for goods and services, the air began to clear itself and the water to flow with less trash and fewer toxins. Turns out the earth probably does better without us. Turns out we need the earth more than the earth needs us. Turns out that when we accept our humble and loving place as a creature of God – loved, claimed and redeemed, but not the center of the universe – then we can love not only one another but the creatures and the earth that God has made. And in accepting those limits – chosen because of our love for the Creator – we can find our right place and so become more holy.

What is it that we have demanded, collected, hoarded, and taken that we now see that we need to give up out of holy love and obedience to God? How does finding our right place in God's household change how we treat each other, the creatures God has made, and the very earth that sustains our lives? Will we go back to demanding our own rights and chafing against obedient, reverent living? Or will we be set apart from the rest of humans by our love for God and each other, our obedience to the truth and our reverent living? What do we choose?

1 Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah in the verses just following what we read this morning:

*All human life on the earth is like grass,
And all human glory is like a flower in a field.
The grass dries up and its flower falls off,
But the Lord's word endures forever. (Isa 40:7-8)*

Let those who have ears to hear, both hear and rejoice!
All praise and honor be to God alone!