

Righteousness, Not Retaliation  
1 Peter 2:19-25  
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So...let's talk about money! (While waving baseball bat menacingly.)

Everybody ready to give next week on Consecration Sunday? I thought you were!

This is, of course, the Sunday of the year where your pastor is called upon to do a little teaching on the concept of stewardship, that spiritual practice of generosity and sharing, but also more generally the good use and conservation of what God has entrusted to us. On such a Sunday, tonight's passage from the book of Acts is to a pastor what a fastball, belt high, middle of the plate is to a baseball player: something to drive out of the park, and hence my little Louisville Sluggercito. There we have the believers, the old timers and the new converts, and it says that they "had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." A classic text on generosity. Everyone gave, everyone shared, no one was left in any need. I should be able to end my sermon right there, with such a great example of generosity to guide your prayerful reflection heading into next Sunday. Fastball, belt high, heart of the plate, out of the park!

But I know you by now. I know that your curiosity about generosity is insatiable, and that you are always looking for meatier theological reflection on the theme. You could never be content with something that would simply improve the

pastor's batting average. No, you want to know if it is really possible to link the Apostle Peter's words about enduring suffering to Consecration Sunday. Because if that case could be made, you wouldn't have to spend this last agonizing week before Consecration Sunday trying to decide how much of your income God is calling you to give to the ministry of Jesus Christ through ECF. You would already be convicted that God is calling you to give no less than...one hundred percent.

Yes, you heard it here first. God is calling you to give everything for the ministry of Jesus Christ. It's right there in First Peter 2:21: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." Is there any doubt that Christ gave one hundred percent? Let us follow in his steps. Is there any doubt that Christ suffered for one hundred percent of your sins? A few verses later we read, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." Let us live for righteousness. Yes, we are called to give one hundred percent. But God is nothing if not merciful, and so, when it comes to your income, God is content to let you keep ninety percent. That's right. You get the good disciple discount of ninety percent and are therefore called to give a mere ten percent to help our church be the heart, hands, and voice of the Jesus Christ who gave one hundred percent for us. What a deal!

This text from First Peter does not, of course, talk about money or tithing. It does however talk about giving, both what Christ gave for us, and what we are

called to give, or not give, to others. The truth is that there is no text in the Bible which is not a stewardship sermon waiting to be preached, not because pastors are money-grubbing types who can't stop talking about tithing, but because in the end, every text in the Bible is about what God gave for us, a truth that calls us to constant reflection about what we are called to give for others. In the second chapter of this letter, Peter is giving his flock guidance about how to live in the midst of a hostile environment, one in which abuse and suffering were a virtual certainty for followers of Jesus Christ. Those who received this letter were slaves or household servants who not only were subject to the whims of their masters for being slaves, but also for being Christians, that odd, new, cannibalistic twist on Judaism, or so it seemed to the uninitiated. These were people with every right to strike back, or get even, if they could get away with it. But Peter cautions otherwise. And what is the basis for him telling them not to return evil with evil, not to retaliate or strike back? The example of Christ, who gave everything for us. “ ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.” Righteousness, rather than retaliation.

We've heard and seen a lot about retaliation in the last couple of weeks, especially around the death of Osama bin Laden, and the corresponding threats and

attacks by those sympathetic to him. We've heard of corporate retaliation and sabotage by Facebook, planting lies about Google to undermine consumer confidence in its business. Several professional basketball players have been suspended recently during the playoffs for retaliating with excessive force against opposing players they think have done them wrong. And it will go on and on, because that is the human way of going about things. The desire to get even is almost as strong as the desire to get ahead. To be sure, even our God and our Holy Book seem at times to condone getting even for injustices done to the chosen people, and those passages give us both comfort at the power of our God, but also pause at the divine sanction of violence. Stronger, however, is the biblical witness lived in the body of Jesus Christ, who offered not a mumblin' word as he was being interrogated, who asked forgiveness from the cross for those who knew not what they were doing, who forsook the power of legions of angels to rescue him and vanquish his enemies. It seems that Peter himself has learned the lesson about retaliation, he who cut off the ear of the high priest's slave as Jesus was being arrested, when he reminds us of the other way, the way Jesus responded: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten." Yes, retaliation is the human way, but it is not Jesus' way.

It is not impossible to overcome the urge to retaliate, and to return in like manner whatever evil we have received. Benjamin Weir was a missionary in Lebanon for 31 years. On May 8, 1984, he was abducted and held for sixteen

months. He was always blindfolded in the presence of his captors and was almost always in solitary confinement. He wrote about how, in his tiny room chained to a steam radiator, he looked around and made each stark piece of material into a symbol. The room's French door had 120 slats. He designated each of those 120 slats with names of those before him who'd been witnesses to Christ. Through crises and suffering, they'd seen and trusted God's faithfulness. Consequently, he had a crowd of faithful examples always with him. But above all, Weir meditated upon the faithful example of Jesus Christ; and, even after such a horrible ordeal, he didn't bear ill will toward his captors. How else could one do that unless the way of Jesus Christ, rather than our human way, is our supreme example?

The story of Benjamin Weir reminds us that in the midst of giving his counsel, Peter is very clear about something it is important we remember, and that is that the suffering that has God's approval is the suffering we endure for doing what is right. "If you endure when you are being beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, [then] you have God's approval." Don't expect, Peter is saying, to have God on your side when you are doing something wrong. There won't be any divine protection or redemptive suffering if you can't do the right thing. But when you are an example of Jesus Christ to the world, as he was an example for us, then there is something meritorious in your suffering. If we had started reading a little earlier in the letter, we would have learned the two reasons why we are called to live for righteousness.

In verse twelve, we learn that the reason is, “so that, though the Gentiles malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.” And in verse thirteen, we learn we are called to do it for the Lord’s sake, not our own. These reasons too are based on the example of Christ on the cross, who went to his death not for his own sake, but for God’s, and whose obedience brought the centurion at the foot of the cross to proclaim, “Truly, this man was innocent.” The way of Christ is to return a right for a wrong, to return a godly thing in place of a human thing.

I want to bring this back around to where we began, with talking about our giving. Retaliation is a form of giving. Returning evil for evil, we give to others a cold shoulder, a biting comment, a slap to the cheek, or worse. We give ourselves satisfaction when we hold a grudge or plan our revenge. But when we give in those ways, we give as the world gives, not as God gives. In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says something revealing. He says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” If the world gives anything at all, it gives it either in retaliation or self-interest. It gives it with a closed fist, either striking out or giving grudgingly. It gives it with the threat of a baseball bat behind it. It gives it expecting something in return. This is the kind of giving Peter is warning his flock against, giving back to their abusers the very same worldly gift they have received. If we give as the world gives, we can expect more of the same in return, and the endless cycle of violence and poverty will go

on and on and on.

But if we give as God gives, we give peace. If we give as God gives, following in Christ's steps, we may have to endure suffering and hardship, we may have to endure not being able to keep up with the Joneses, we may have to endure a little bit of sacrifice each month to honor the commitment we have made to share what God has called us to share, but when we endure these things, we are giving to others the peace that Christ gave us. I hope you don't find giving, whether to the church or to anyone else, to be an experience of suffering, but rather of joy, but if you do, remember this: "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval." This is the life of righteousness given to us by Jesus Christ, who calls us to give in return, not menacing us with a baseball bat, but inviting to give as he gave for us, as the believers in Acts gave for one another, as we have given generously as a congregation for more than twenty -five years. May God bless you as you reflect this week on what you are called to give for Christ and his church. Amen.