

Sunday, May 15, 2011: 1 Peter 2:19-25

by [Ron Adams](#) in the [May 3, 2011](#) issue

*"But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval." (1 Pet. 2:20b)*

Peter exhorts his listeners to endure suffering gracefully. When read through a particular lens, this advice seems right. After all, he calls his community to follow a pattern set by Jesus himself. Jesus did not retaliate when abused. He did not curse when being cursed. He did not insist that he was responsible only for himself, but assumed the sins of the world.

This instruction is not unique to Peter. Language like his is found elsewhere in the New Testament: self-emptying language, self-denying language, language of endurance and perseverance in the face of persecution and hardship. While we contemporary Christians may be skittish with so much talk about suffering, we can at least hear Peter's words for what they appear to be: sincere counsel to those seeking to emulate the way of Jesus.

On a personal level, I find Peter's words congenial. I don't want to suffer abuse, and I don't long for opportunities to practice endurance. But as a member of a community that insists that Jesus calls us away from violence and retaliation, Peter's call resonates. It fits my Mennonite way of following Jesus.

Unfortunately, the lectionary editors have cut Peter's words, lopping off a key opening verse of the paragraph—one that challenges the reader by turning what may seem inspiring into something unacceptable and even repugnant.

"Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." That changes everything, doesn't it? Start at verse 19 and we'll have difficulty teaching this passage, but start at verse 18 and things get worse: we hear Peter telling the most vulnerable members of his community to "suck it up."

A conservative seminary taught me to value the scriptures, to hold and handle them with care and to preach them faithfully. It wasn't exactly a "God said it, I believe it,

that settles it" education, but close to it. It never occurred to me to resist the text or to question it, let alone preach against it. But that's precisely what I want to do with this week's text.

Even without the opening verse, preaching this text is problematic. Our congregations include many who have suffered abuse—spouses, children, people with deep scars from years of harm committed against them (often by someone they loved) or people with fragile mental health who join the Christian community in search of safety and solace. Preaching this text uncritically can inflict more harm on already tender souls; we may imply (or say outright) that our listeners' suffering is somehow ordained and that anything but a submissive response to it is sinful. A preacher with even a lick of compassion won't go there.

This situation is complicated further by Peter's acceptance of the master-slave relationship. All of the contextualizing in the world cannot change this fact. The gap between Peter and us is already difficult to bridge. Now he encourages slaves—his brothers and sisters in Christ—to acquiesce not only to their station but also to the abuse that comes with it. This only widens the gap.

That being said, we may wonder just what the good news in this text is. The first step in seeking that good news is to speak plainly against the text. We are not to throw it away, dismiss it out of hand or lop off the opening verse and try to salvage the rest. That's too easy and doesn't serve anybody.

Instead, we are to speak honestly about how difficult it is to reconcile Peter's instruction with what we know to be good news. We admit and lament how early Christian acceptance of slavery legitimized it in our own nation. We speak plainly about how such texts can harm those who have suffered abuse and admit that the church has ignored that fact for far too long. We remind ourselves that Peter was no more infallible or enlightened than we are and that he was a product of his own age and culture—not to diminish the offense of the text or to let Peter off the hook, but as a form of confession. If this great saint wore blinders, what is it that we may be unwilling or unable to see?

Only then can we seek the good news that is in the text. For us Mennonites, that good news may be an affirmation of nonretaliation and nonviolence. Others may be drawn to the notion of imitating Jesus, and still others by that lovely last verse: "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and

guardian of your souls" (2:25).

There is good news here, hidden by cultural rubbish though it may be. When we dig beneath the surface, we will hear the gospel.