

“Imperishable Action”

Reading: John 10:1-10; 1 Peter 2:19-25

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I don't know what percentage of the internet is made up of disagreements, but I'm sure it's very high. Facebook status updates, comment forums, blog posts, news articles, whatever format you use to state your opinion online, you'd better brace yourself to defend it. People love to disagree online. And of course it's just the latest version of the types of disagreements people have always had, but part of what makes the internet tricky is that it's impersonal and it's instant. It's not anonymous, but you rarely see the face or hear the voice of another commenter on a forum, so it's easy to furiously type up an impassioned response and send it off into the ether to put your opponent in their place once and for all. And, unlike sending a letter, it's instant, so it's easy to say something in the heat of the moment and hit 'send' when another moment's reflection would have served you well. There's even a well-known rule of thumb called Godwin's Law, which half-seriously states that the longer an online argument goes on, the more and more likely it is that one side will compare the other to the Nazis.

When we're at a distance from our opponent, it's easy to stop thinking of them as another person. It doesn't have to be on the internet; it can be a strongly-worded letter of complaint to a company or an angry phone call to customer service. If you haven't done it in one form or another, you're a better person than I am. There's a reason that the bad guys often wear masks in movies, whether they're Stormtroopers in *Star Wars* or evil ninjas in an action movie: that distance lets you stop thinking of them as a person, which makes it easier to dispose of them.

Doing the opposite — remembering that your opponent is a flesh and blood human just like you, with thoughts and feelings and mistakes and a history and a family — taking off that mask and humanizing your enemy can sometimes stop a fight dead. We start to see ourselves or our loved ones looking back out of those eyes, maybe, and it makes it hard to spit out those angry words or fire that bullet.

Bringing that sense of humanity to an enemy takes us in the direction Peter is going in our passage this morning. But the humanity Peter has in mind may not be quite what we expect. Remember that he is writing to Christians scattered throughout the eastern Roman Empire whose new life in Christ has made them exiles in their homelands. Their allegiance to the risen Christ has rendered them suspect in the eyes of their former families and friends, who presumably worship the Roman state and a pantheon of gods. Setting aside all of those for the sake of the gospel put these Christians on the fringes of their societies, and so they were foreigners or exiles for their faith.

And the question that they seem to be struggling with, or at least the question Peter seems to be answering, is how they ought to relate to their societies under these new circumstances. They've been excluded and marginalized by others, and they've recognized that Jesus is Lord of all, so where does that leave them? Can they reject the Roman state? Can they overturn their social relationships? Can a Christian wife divorce her non-Christian husband? Can a Christian slave run away from his or her human master, since the gospel is a message of true freedom?

Peter has been building up to this point for a while now. He has laid a foundation for a humanizing message not on our common humanity, but on the imperishable work of Jesus Christ. It's an unshakable foundation, one that was planned from the creation of the world and will stand long after. But as we've been saying for the last couple of weeks, it's not imperishable in the sense that it's so static that it can't be touched, it's imperishable in the sense that it's so alive that death doesn't even know where to begin. We have a living hope, a living God, the living Jesus Christ. And this is the core of his message to these Christian "exiles."

It's a theological point, this claim about Jesus, but theology drives life, so that making a theological claim changes every claim that comes after, and every action that follows. It's not just good news for Jesus that He's alive, it's good news for us because it transforms how we live. And this is what Peter is trying to show. Jesus Christ is alive forever as our living hope, therefore, respond a certain way when you are persecuted. Our natural response to a threat is to get away from that threat one way or another, whether we run away from it, scare it enough to get it to run away from us, or use whatever means we can to eliminate the threat. Do these Christian "exiles" run away from the mess of their culture and live in a secluded, Christians-only utopia? Do they try to impose their views on the non-Christians around them? Or do they band together and fight for their rights?

There is another way, one that is rarely considered in the kingdoms of the world: the imperishable way of the risen Christ. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." The call is to "bear up" under this suffering, because this is the response Christ modeled for us. "When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly." Jesus trusted His Father so deeply and so completely that suffering and death did not deter Him from the expectation to love. What mattered to Him was to be faithful to the mission His Father had given Him, even when the world made Him suffer and die for it. And He is not just our salvation and the source of our imperishable hope: *because* we have that imperishable hope, He is our example and we do likewise. We know that God will be faithful even in the face of suffering, because He's already done it for Jesus.

And we have to emphasize that this is *unjust* suffering we're talking about. Peter is very clear on that point. Jesus "committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth;" He did absolutely nothing to deserve the treatment He got. Sometimes the church has fudged on that point, and argued that *surely* we must be able to fight back to defend ourselves. Surely we have the right to fight for our rights. But the whole point is that if anyone had the right, if anyone was suffering unjustly, that person was Jesus, and He demonstrated that the kingdom of God operates on an economy of overwhelming love toward others and trust in God, not on fighting for rights.

He puts it another way in the next chapter: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." That's not being naïve, it's not being passive, and it's not being a doormat. It's a call to creative, intelligent love. It doesn't mean that we just sit there and take endless abuse, it means that we find ways of turning our suffering into blessing for others.

Remember that the context of this hard message is living in the midst of unequal relationships in a suspicious culture, and so Peter lists a variety of relationships and calls His audience to render the

appropriate honor. The question is whether our freedom in Christ means we can rebel against people who have power over us, but Peter says no, bear up under the unjust suffering because this is a credit to you before God. If you, citizen, rebel against the pagan emperor, or if you, slave, run away from your master, or if you, spouse, lord your Christian freedom over your husband or wife, you are in effect proving them right in their distrust of you. You're justifying their suspicion and persecution.

But here's the really interesting part of what Peter has to say. *Why* do we respond this way? What's the motivation and the goal? Do we do it simply because Jesus did it, and because God tells us to do likewise? That's the lowest, most basic level of ethics, doing something because an authority told you to. Maybe a better motive would be to argue that repaying evil with blessing is a method for getting what we want; maybe our good behavior will make our enemies feel bad and they'll do what we want. Our blessing them then is a pragmatic, utilitarian strategy ultimately geared toward our own benefit. Maybe a slightly better, more evolved ethic would be to say that bearing up under suffering is a good virtue, that it reveals a character that is worth living; it's a function of virtue ethics.

None of those are necessarily bad motives, but Peter points us to something much deeper. The key lies in Peter's explanation of the atonement, of the mechanism of Christ's death for us. It's a very clear and familiar progression, but it's significant because Peter is calling us to "follow in His steps." It begins with Jesus being blameless. Again, this is unjust suffering; He's done nothing to deserve it. Next, He suffered willingly. He didn't fight it or resist it. "When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly." Rather than fighting for what was rightfully His, He trusted in the ultimate faithfulness of God. And finally, He did so for the sake of others, for their salvation, as an example, so that they might see. He suffered unjustly, willingly, for the sake of others, even those who were causing His suffering.

"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us," Peter says just before the passage we read today. In other words, our motivation for loving an unbelieving world is not because God tells us, and it's not as a tactic to get what we want, and it's not because love is a good virtue, it's because doing good in response to evil serves as a witness to our relationship with the risen Christ. We do good in response to evil because we love our persecutors and want the evildoer to come to Christ, and so we refrain from retaliating as a way of showing our imperishable hope because of Christ's resurrection. We recognize the humanity even of our enemies, because as humans they are beloved of Christ, and He has called even them to return to Him. It is not suffering for the name of Christ that Peter says is a credit to us, it's being a faithful witness in the face of that suffering that is a credit to us.

And the only way that we can be genuine witnesses of the risen Christ is if we know Him personally, deeply, faithfully. This imperishable hope does not come to us as a mode of ethics or a philosophy or simply a historical fact to be believed; Christ gives us an imperishable hope for living because He is alive, and the hope comes in connection to Him. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. He has come that we may have life, and that we may have it to the full. That life that confounds death, that imperishable life, that life that is not afraid of suffering because it is more concerned about the soul of the one causing the suffering, can only come by truly knowing the risen Christ.



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