

## The Guardian of Your Soul

### 1 Peter 2:19-25

I must admit that this is not an easy passage of scripture to speak on – in fact I wish I had picked one of the three other choices. The verse before our passage speaks of the demand that slaves be submissive to their masters. First Peter seemingly valorizes suffering, such that the passage can be used to justify the oppression of the powerless, while also encouraging the overzealous to seek suffering for its own sake. The reality of this danger has been borne out throughout the history of the church.

Nevertheless, this passage cannot be simply dismissed, given the profound fruits that it has nurtured within the life of the church. The Franciscan movement, for example, in its early days, could be seen as a reflection on this passage, and when the passage and the movement of Francis and Clare are understood together, they open up for us a new vista on the Christian life. The Franciscan life was an embrace of poverty and all that poverty entailed in thirteenth-century Europe. For Francis and Clare, this was a life walking in Christ's footsteps (see [v. 21](#)). For them, holy poverty, revealed in the incarnation of God in a manger, goes to the heart of the gospel. Through his voluntary poverty, Jesus embodied for his followers the freedom and joy of living in utter dependence on God. For Francis and Clare, humans were made for such poverty—Adam and Eve owned nothing in Eden, they would argue—so that our craving for ownership is the fruit of our fall. Early Franciscans joined Christ in a discipline of poverty, both as a testimony to the essential joy of this trusting life and as a testimony against

the rise of mercantile capitalism, which drove so many to an involuntary poverty that destroyed life and spirit.

Clare, in her fourth letter to Agnes of Prague, offered a rich metaphor for what it means to follow in Christ's footsteps. She took up the metaphor of the mirror and asked Agnes to prepare herself by gazing into the mirror of Christ. As she saw herself in Christ's humility and suffering, and adorned herself with the virtues therein revealed, she too could serve as a mirror of Christ's love and faith to the world. Through Clare's letter we understand our suffering in the light of Christ's suffering, and we grasp the sense of this suffering only as we realize its redemptive purpose. Clare understood 1 Peter's testimony that Christ did not embrace poverty and the suffering that it entailed for their own sake, but out of trust in God (v. 23) and love for humanity (v. 24). Through this suffering poverty, Christ mirrored for us the fruitfulness of a faith-filled life.

A mysterious story centered on Francis testified to the truth of 1 Peter's vision for the early Franciscan movement:

The same [Brother Leonard] related in the same place that one day at Saint Mary's, blessed Francis called Brother Leo and said: "Brother Leo, write." He responded: "Look, I'm ready!" "Write," he said, "what true joy is."

"A messenger arrives and says that all the Masters of Paris have entered the Order. Write: this isn't true joy! Or, that all the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and the King of England [have entered the Order]. Write: this isn't true joy! Again, that my brothers have gone to the non-believers and converted all of them to the faith; again, that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and

perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn't consist in any of these things."

"Then what is true joy?"

"I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It's winter time, muddy, and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come to the gate and, after I've knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: 'Who are you?' 'Brother Francis,' I answer. 'Go away!' he says. 'This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not come in!' When I insist, he replies: 'Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don't come back to us again! There are men of us here like you—we don't need you!' I stand again at the door and say: 'For the love of God, take me in tonight!' And he replies: 'I will not! Go to the Crosier's place and ask there!'

"I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this."

For Francis, joy was found not in anything that he accomplished in the world, for these accomplishments are mere possessions that possess us more than we them. Such success only breeds a concern that we continue the success, leading us to rest our souls in the successes that we so precariously possess. We find joy, rather, when we have the humility to claim nothing as our right, when we "own" no prerogative, not even to find housing among our own, but simply offer ourselves to God in trust, accepting what the world offers us, secure in God. For Francis this freedom and joy we find in Christ—"by his wounds we are healed"—and insofar as we walk in Christ's footsteps, we offer this same freedom and joy to those whose lives we touch.

**Stephen Edmondson**

In our scripture new Christians who happened to be slaves in pagan households were being harassed for their beliefs. Living in a world where jumping to the master's every whim was considered acceptable behavior, these fledgling Christians had to add insults about their own belief to the list of ways that life was difficult.

First Peter attempts a pastoral word to these folk. Making the distinction between suffering for a just cause and suffering for an unjust cause, the text teases a qualified sanction for suffering under certain circumstances. Nowhere does it suggest that suffering is a legitimate condition for those who are abused, coerced, or oppressed. Nowhere does it suggest a stoic tolerance for violence against anyone. Nowhere does it suggest that God's name be invoked as the hand strikes or the belt comes out or the vestments come off.

What is suggested is preference for an alternative ethic, an alternative to the pagan culture of which these fledgling Christians were a part and an alternative in their own tradition. The radical choice to hold fire when under attack is almost more than mere mortals can imagine, yet Christ modeled this. Abuse did not produce more abuse. Suffering did not produce more suffering. Hurt was not the knee-jerk response to being hurt. To trust God in the midst of suffering was considered the high calling to which these new believers should aspire. A hard lesson under any condition, for slaves it must have been brutal.

For people in our communities: one gang member's slight becomes another's death warrant. In the boardroom, one failed contract becomes the automatic justification for downsizing. In the school-room, one quirky learner quickly becomes labeled as a problem. In the family, one disappointment in a relationship becomes the foundation for divorce. In the

church, one year of decline means the church is dead. By and large, we work under the constraint in this world of suffering all of the time.

Embedded in our 1 Peter text, however, is the subtle message that there are always more than two ways of seeing things. One can be abused and not become a serial abuser. One can suffer ridicule or physical harm and not fall into a cycle of never-ending violent behavior. Jesus' experience on the cross teaches us that God always has options—life-giving options, options that expand possibilities and trigger in us instincts that only God can touch.

Our author suggests to struggling Christians that their world may not be as restricted and contained as they think. To suffer ridicule or abuse from their master does not ultimately determine their own self-worth. God will judge justly, both master and slave (v. 23). As an antidote to all the ways life is frightening and dangerous, God offers a way. It is an expansive way.

In solidarity with our first brothers and sisters in the faith, we understand something of what it means to be boxed in or even enslaved. While we are not in the situation of first-century slaves, we have plenty that makes us feel less than free. Our enslavement today may be to a mind-set that is strangled by our limited thinking. Fears and dangers in our own world enslave and limit our creativity for solutions. Anxieties about health and work and the next paycheck can enslave our instincts for hope in the future. We need to learn from these early believers about trust in the midst of our own suffering.

Today, as faithful Christians we can find ourselves up against the wall in a culture that could not care less about an alternative ethic or about trusting God. The prevailing ethic is self-centered at its root and considers "the other" only as an item on the tax return. Trust is defined as the safest place to store money. Hemmed in on all sides, we are spiritually caught in the limits we have set for ourselves. The antidote we need will burst open

the tombs that hold us captive and liberate us for the expansive way that God offers. We walk out of that tomb unfettered for a life that might actually mean something one day.

We must remember, as Peter assured us that we are in the arms of the shepherd, our soul is being guarded. The shepherd knows our name and leads us through this age and the next. With our soul guarded by the good shepherd, the freedom to act alternatively in the world starts to look like a possibility.

Commentator Joy Strome overheard a conversation between her young nephew and his friend, who was a much bigger boy. "I could beat you up," the friend said, to which her nephew replied, "Yes, but why would you want to?" The conversation ended. God always offers a life-giving option. We are called to find that option and live with it! **Joy Douglas Strome**

Assured that God is the guardian of our souls, through Christ we are forgiven, loved, free, and able to endure the challenges of life.

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