

Today is commonly known within the church as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” a reference derived from the various readings associated with the day. Our Psalm, for instance, is Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want...” The Gospel is from the 10th chapter of John, where Jesus speaks of himself as “the gate for the sheep” and, in the verses just following today’s reading, as “the good shepherd.”

Today, however, I’d like to focus on our Epistle reading, also appropriate to the day, which ends this way: *“For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”* (1 Peter 2:25)

When Peter uses this phrase to describe Jesus, we might well overlook how rich a word he uses here. For instance, in the New International Version, the word the NRSV translates as “guardian” is rendered, “overseer.” Other translations use the word “protector.” The actual word, however, in the Greek, is *episkopos* – that’s right, the same *episkopos* after which our beloved Episcopal Church is named. The word we most often use to translate *episkopos* is “bishop.” (The Episcopal Church is named what it is because it is overseen by bishops.)

This rich word, *episkopos*, describes well what Jesus has done for us. He has laid down his life for us, as, in the early Church’s understanding, a bishop would. He is ever looking out for us, ever guiding us as a good shepherd would guide his sheep. (Would that bishops always lived up to the rich calling to which they’ve been called!) In any event, by his words, we his sheep have been healed. He has brought those who heed his voice into his fold – and now, no one can snatch his faithful ones away.

As beautiful and appropriate as today’s Epistle is, it is also disquieting – at least for me. It describes Jesus’ actions as the “Good Shepherd,” but it also describes the kind of behavior *we*, the *sheep*, are called to display if we are to follow him. In a word, we’re to practice patience. To heed Jesus’ voice is to follow his example of patience in the face of undeserved hardship. That’s not easy. It means being trapped in unpleasant situations sometimes. And that’s more than a little bit frightening.

In these days of rampant wife and child abuse, for example, none of us wants to encourage victims to remain victims. It is oppressive and cruel. And it seems hard to believe that’s what Peter would have meant in addressing the early Christians. The last

thing we'd want to do is urge patience in such a matter, even if such patience makes them more "Jesus-like" in bearing their suffering.

I believe such does not fall into the scope of what Peter is saying. I see it related, rather, to how we defend ourselves against attacks to our moral fabric – our beliefs and values. The church of Peter's day faced tremendous hardship for its refusal to back down and melt-in to the surrounding society. To be a Christian was to face unjust cruelty. What Peter was trying to raise was a Jesus-like reaction to that. *"When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten."* (1 Peter 2:23) In other words, Jesus did not react to unjust suffering with violence. He non-violently bore it in patience as an act of freedom – as an act of love.

Perhaps the world we live in doesn't react in as physically violent a way to the presence of Christian witness as it did in Peter's day (though recent events lead me to wonder about that), but it doesn't take much imagination to realize we still face tremendous challenges – and tremendous persecution at the hands of secular society. Like the Christians of Peter's day, we are to live our lives in the face of this so that non-Christians *"may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge."* (1 Peter 2:12) We need to tap into the redeeming power of Christ's suffering and not give up, on the one hand, nor revile and threaten, on the other.

When I think of a particularly Christian response to the challenges thrown our way by an unjust and rampantly secular society, I find myself drawn to the words of Martin Luther King as he reflected on the personal trials he faced as a champion for civil rights. *"My personal trials,"* King said, *"have taught me the value of unmerited suffering. I have attempted to see my ordeals as an opportunity to transfigure myself and heal the people. I have lived with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive."*

Listen once again to Peter's words to you this day: *"If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example."* (1 Peter 2:20-21) My friends, be not afraid to suffer for the cause of Christ.

For when we do – when we stick our necks out for the faith, the values, the basics of what we believe, we become aligned with Jesus, followers of the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. Amen.