

“Creative Advocacy”  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 21, 2017  
Acts 17:22-31    1 Peter 3:13-18    John 14:15-21  
First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho  
Pastor Andy Kennaly

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” The author of 1 Peter 3:13 asks this question that rings down through the centuries. “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” It seems like fear is very prevalent in our culture. Maybe that’s why the word, “security” is in the news so much. There’s entire governmental departments focused on “National Security” and billions of dollars are spent every year to advise us and monitor external threats foreign and domestic. Even the word, Terrorism is laced with fear because there are people who want to do harm to others through acts of terror. The most extreme, or most violent people in our world would love it if World War Three broke out and violence overtook the nations. Many of these types of people think God is on their side and as the world comes to an end God will rescue them, place them in charge, and create a new paradise uncluttered by all that God condemns, from their point of view. Being “eager to do what is good” presumes that we know what is good.

Peter may or may not have written this letter. Biblical scholars debate this. But even if Peter himself did not write it, the author is certainly influenced by Peter and it carries qualities of this Apostle through its teachings. One of the truths this letter declares gets shown right in that question we looked at, asking about who can harm you when you are eager to do good. This question is asked right after a section that talks about having “unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (verse 8). We are told “not to repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing.”

Then comes that word, “Now.” “Now, who will harm you?” Now that you live in love, have sympathy, intentionally nurture a tender heart and humble mind; now is when it’s possible to be eager to do what is good, to not be harmed by others even if you suffer. Peter is inviting us to define the word YOU by going deeper and broader than our own sense of self; we are invited to a new identity found in Christ.

There’s an introduction to the Book of 1 Peter written by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* version of the Bible and I’d like to share it with you because it helps us come alongside Peter and the early church that was shaped

by Peter. He says, “Peter’s concise confession – ‘You are the Messiah, the Christ’ – focused on the faith of the disciples on Jesus as God among us, in person, carrying out the eternal work of salvation. Peter seems to have been a natural leader, commanding the respect of his peers by sheer force of personality. In every listing of Jesus’ disciples, Peter’s name is invariably first.

“In the early church, his influence was enormous and acknowledged by all. By virtue of his position, he was easily the most powerful figure in the Christian community. And his energetic preaching, ardent prayer, bold healing, and wise direction confirmed the trust placed in him.

“The way Peter handled himself in that position of power is even more impressive than the power itself. He stayed out of the center, didn’t ‘wield’ power, maintained a scrupulous subordination to Jesus. Given his charismatic personality and well-deserved position at the head, he could easily have taken over, using the prominence of his association with Jesus to promote himself. That he didn’t do it, given the frequency with which spiritual leaders do exactly that, is impressive. Peter is a breath of fresh air.

Then Eugene concludes with this: “The two letters Peter wrote exhibit the qualities of Jesus that the Holy Spirit shaped in him: a readiness to embrace suffering rather than prestige, a wisdom developed from experience and not imposed from a book, a humility that lacked nothing in vigor or imagination. From what we know of the early stories of Peter, he had in him all the makings of a bully. That he didn’t become a bully (and religious bullies are the worst kind) but rather the boldly confident and humbly self-effacing servant of Jesus Christ that we discern in these letters, is a compelling witness to what he himself describes as ‘a brand-new life, with everything to live for.’”

A brand-new life. Embracing suffering. Developing wisdom. Active humility. These are very counter cultural yet Christ-like qualities nurtured by the Holy Spirit, and they lay at the core of even having a desire to do good as one shaped by Christ, as one living in ways that seek God’s creative Advocacy through the living Presence of the Holy Spirit.

Did you notice we jumped to this right away this morning? In our prayer of confession, we prayed together, “Good and gracious God...by your Holy Spirit, soften the hardness of our hearts, and empower us to glorify you

in worship and humble service.” The Words of Assurance that followed this prayer encourage us to “open our minds to new truth, our hearts to new love, and our lives to new action, even as we are made new creations.”

Look at what comes from this! 1 Peter says not to fear what they fear, and not to be intimidated. There is hope in us, and it comes out with gentleness and reverence even in the face of people who are demanding. It’s not a question of “if” we get maligned but “when” and abuse even comes for good conduct. Suffering for doing good, yet maintaining a clear conscience: this is possible when we take the other two readings seriously. Like John sharing Christ’s teaching that we are given the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, and we know this Spirit because this Spirit lives inside us. Jesus says, “[The Spirit] abides with you, and he will be in you.” Paul also gives us a clue by quoting a Greek poet to the people in Athens, saying, “in God we live and move and have our being...for we too are his offspring.”

This biblical message is a relational message. Like Jesus says in John, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” God is in us, lives through us, is all around us, and in all things. We are in God. There is no separation, no split, no division, no need to externalize the Lord.

These teachings about living with soft hearts and humble minds are key, pivotal teachings that invite us deeper and deeper into the love that holds the roots of our very identity. Staying in touch with your roots is what keeps everything else in proper perspective; it's what keeps us grounded and focused, claiming our unity with God and one another, like Peter, so that our gifts are for the world's benefit and not just a bully thing. Servants of Christ, formed by the Spirit, claimed by our loving Father's unconditional and eternal Being, we are inspired to set aside anything less.

As we continue to live in Eastertide, these Sundays of Easter in the light of Resurrection faith, asking questions and struggling with a very confused and violent world, we invite God to once again fill us with new life in Christ's name. As heirs of Christ, we know there is a deeper narrative at work, one based on goodness and grace, on original blessing that leads us forward with hope. We are given new myths, new truths, to shape our world. They are actually older than the myths we've bought into, and they draw us back to remember that we are peaceful by nature, not violent. We are forgiving by nature, not vengeful. We are hopeful by nature, not lost to despair.

Claiming our identity as new creations, in relationship with God and one another, we are the Church, part of a great cloud of witnesses that forever sing God's praise and daily invite the hard work of humbling our minds, softening our hearts, so we can be united in faith, hope, and love with God's larger consciousness that surrounds the world with peace that can never be taken away.

Thanks be to God for Easter joy, for inspired living, and transformed hearts and minds that allow God to change us, shape us, and send us from the inside out through creative Advocacy. In Christ, through Christ, and with Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, may God be glorified, now and forever. Amen.