

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 Feeling Mistreated for your Faith?
 God offers us life-giving options.
 Scripture: Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:1-9, 19-25
 Rev. Steve Filyk
 July 3, 2022
 National Anthem: O Canada
 Opening Hymn: Hail, our once-rejected Jesus [353]
 Choruses: Blessed be your name, Days of Elijah
 Communion Hymn: Behold the lamb (communion hymn)
 Closing Hymn: It is well with my soul
 Communion & Canada Day

Last week we ventured into the first epistle of Peter.

There we encountered the idea that faith includes
 Both joy and suffering.

During my sermon I shared with you a concept
 that was new to me,
 one described by Pope Francis:

'Polite Persecution'.

'Polite Persecution' isn't the sort of violent persecution of Christians
 We read about in history.

Take for instance what the Roman historian Tacitus
 recounts from his first-hand experience of growing up in Rome
 during the first century:

"to stop the rumor [that Nero had set Rome on fire],
 [Emperor Nero] falsely charged with guilt,
 and punished with the most fearful tortures,
 the persons commonly called Christians...

In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport...
 they were covered with the hides of wild beasts,
 and worried to death by dogs,

or nailed to crosses, or set fire to,
 and when the day waned,
 burned to serve for the evening lights..."ⁱ

In speaking of 'Polite Persecution',
 Pope Francis isn't speaking of the violent persecution of Christians
 Under the Roman Empire,
 or under Communism,
 or Islam.

Pope Francis is speaking about the more subtle pressures to conform
 Experienced by Christians in post-Christian nations.
 The persecution often is less about declaring Jesus is Lord
 As practicing or promoting values
 connected to that Lordship.

“As the pope explains, “if you don’t like this,
 you will be punished:
 you’ll lose your job...
 or you’ll be set aside.”

We read about this fairly regularly...

One writer notes:

“At the hands of bureaucrats, bosses, and judges,
 Christian merchants, universities, schools, hospitals,
 charities, campus fellowships, students, public officials,
 employees, and citizens

have been fired, fined, shut down,
 threatened with a loss of accreditation,
 and evicted for living out traditional convictions...”ⁱⁱ

This past week a non-Presbyterian ministry colleague of mine
 shared a Facebook post
 That I found, well, suspect.

The post included the statement:
 “Your body is YOURS (all caps)
 Given to you by God.”

Now I realise this was part of a lament
 About the overturning of Roe V. Wade.

But I found it disturbing that another minister
 Would share without reflection,
 A post that expresses a secular individualist rights ethic
 All dressed up in Christian garb.

The Heidelberg Catechism
 Elegantly expresses an orthodox alternative:

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I am NOT my own,
 but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—
 to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

I was bothered and so I made a comment
 And had some back and forth
 With that colleague.

He was respectful.

But others who read my comment weren't so kind.
 It soon became clear that I had touched a nerve,
 and that my Christian perspective was not welcome.

What I failed to realise is what philosopher Charles Taylor
 Says our about era of expressive individualism:
 "bare choice [is] a prime value,
 irrespective of what it is a choice between..."
 and "the sin which is not tolerated is intolerance."ⁱⁱⁱ

Here are some of the comments I received:

"This was a stunningly bad faith argument
 both in initial implementation and in every subsequent response...
 But it is only to be expected."

AND

"You, a white man,
 are deflecting from the very real and disastrous history
 of white Christians
 when they come in contact with any other people.
 From the crusades, to colonization,
 to the current rise of Christo-fascism,
 Christianity has been a plague on this Earth..."

Last count there were about 146 comments on my friend's post.

So what did this teach me?
 It reminded me that Facebook isn't a good forum
 For nuanced discussion.

But it also helped me see a little more clearly
 That the values I hold are understood by some
 To be oppressive and undesirable.

Polite persecution? Maybe.
 I didn't lose my job
 but I did experience a lot of hate.

Of course, if we turn to today's passage we will be reminded once more
 That following Jesus includes suffering.
 Unjust suffering.

Our writer tells us:
 "it is commendable if someone bears up
 under the pain of unjust suffering
 because they are conscious of God."^{iv}

Not just to be clear, our epistle writer
 Is at this moment speaking to slaves:
 Christian slaves in Roman households.

“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.”^v

Now please don’t see this commentary of the writer
 As a justification of slavery.
 The writer doesn’t claim the situation is ideal,
 But notes that “dignity and honor”
 can be found in this situation.”^{vi}

Unjust suffering for following Jesus,
 Is understood as praiseworthy by our writer.
 And not only is it praiseworthy, it is following
 the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As our writer notes:
 “When they hurled their insults at [Jesus],
 he did not retaliate;
 when he suffered,
 he made no threats.

Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”^{vii}

Our writer not only tells us that our faith includes suffering,
 But that enduring suffering is commendable.

Again to be clear, the writer isn’t telling us to look for trouble.
 Additionally, the writer tells us not to do things
 that deserve punishment.

But what is clear both here and in the Gospels
 Is that faithful living
 will bear some negative consequences,

Which we must be prepared to endure,
 Without returning evil for evil.

We are called to respond with non-violence and with patience.
 In this way we live out a Christ-like life.

But how do you do this?
 How do you endure suffering unjustly
 Without lashing out?

When someone cuts in front of us on the road,
 We can sometimes get so angry
 we want to run them into the ditch.

But if we react with anger and potential violence
 when someone move into our space on the highways
 how are we to control that desire to retaliate
 when someone mocks or derides
 our most cherished values?

It would seem that we need to be extremely secure
 in our place and our identity,
 To not be thrown off by such challenges,
 To not be angered by these slights or attacks.
 The epistle writer is interested in developing that identity.

Before he talks to his recipients about enduring persecution
 He reminds them all,
 Including those gentile slaves in Roman households,
 Of their God-given identity.

Our write tells people with low status,
 with outsider status,
 that they have the highest regard by God:

“you are a chosen people,
 a royal priesthood,
 a holy nation,
 God’s special possession,

that you may declare the praises of him
 who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”^{viii}

Do those titles have a familiar ring?

The same titles that had previously been applied
 Uniquely to the Patriarchs and the nation of Israel
 Are now heaped upon the Gentile recipients
 of this letter.

While they may be low in status,
 they are chosen, even royal.
 While their religion is derided,
 they have been set apart as God’s special ones.

They... we can endure jeering neighbors
 when we know we are deeply valued and cherished.

They... we can endure polite persecution
 When we understand at the depth of our soul
 that we belong to the Good Shepherd,
 Who is watching over our coming and goings.

All this patient endurance grows God's kingdom.

When people attack us for our faith or our values,
 Our deep-rooted identities and trust in God's faithfulness
 Absorbs their anger.
 We have the wherewithal to confound our enemies
 With gentle response, with love instead of hate.

We can be abused and not become serial abusers.
 We can suffer ridicule or physical harm
 and not fall into a cycle of never-ending violent behavior.^{ix}

We can follow Jesus and be his living examples,
 To a world who desperately needs to meet him.

For you information I'm not actively seeking opportunities
 to challenge people's posts on Facebook.
 But I won't be shamed into being quiet
 When one finds its way into my feed.

I'm a child of the king.
 I'm precious and chosen.
 And that's the confidence I need to follow Jesus
 In a world that rejects him.

Amen.

ⁱ "Nero Persecutes The Christians, 64 A.D." 1 Nov. 2010, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/christians.htm.

ⁱⁱ "Polite Persecution | Daniel Philpott." *First Things*, 2 July 2022, www.firstthings.com/article/2017/04/polite-persecution.

ⁱⁱⁱ James K. A. Smith *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* 85

^{iv} 1 Peter 2:19 NIV

^v Joy Douglas Strome, "Pastoral Perspective on 1 Peter 2:19–25," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 436.

^{vi} Pheme Perkins *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude* 46

^{vii} 1 Peter 2:23 NIV

^{viii} 1 Peter 2:1-9 NIV

^{ix} See Joy Douglas Strome, "Pastoral Perspective on 1 Peter 2:19–25," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 438.