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When a tradesman of Jesus' times passed his craft on to his child, the process began early and continued until the son was ready to take over the father's tools. By then he had so mastered the art of imitating his father's gestures, angles, and grip that the worn grooves of the tools fit his hand like a glove. Someone who had learned a different technique would find the family's tools awkward, and as tools were passed down from generation to generation each worker would feel truly in touch with the family tradition.

This process is similar to what Peter suggests Christians should do in following Christ. As Peter talks about how to respond to unjust persecution, the Greek word he uses for following in Jesus' footsteps actually describes the meticulous process of tracing letters as one learns to write. It suggests long-term concentration and dedication as disciples learn to pattern their behavior on that of the master.

Peter goes into some detail about how the disciples are to emulate Christ. He encourages them to meditate on how Christ refused to be caught in a pattern of reciprocal insult and how he made no threats against his persecutors. It's almost as though Peter were saying, "You can't get by in this world without models, so become aware of and choose the models that influence or even determine your way of living." In teaching this the First Letter of Peter adds detail to what Peter preached

on Pentecost when he urged people to be baptized in the name of Jesus as a way of being saved from “this corrupt generation.”

Without using 21st century vocabulary, Peter was urging his community to be countercultural and to adopt the nonviolence Pope Francis called for in his message for the 2017 World Day of Peace. Pope Francis calls us to, “cultivate nonviolence in our most personal thoughts and values.” How can we do that better than through imitation of Christ? In the encyclical, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis quotes his predecessor, Pope Benedict as saying, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

The author of the First Letter of Peter knew that no philosophy, no political movement is capable of sustaining the work of genuine peacemaking over the long haul. Nonviolence is too prophetic, seemingly too precarious and even unsuccessful to maintain without the help of divine grace. That grace comes to Christians through faith in Jesus Christ. In his 2017 peace message Pope Francis said, “Whoever accepts the Good News of Jesus is able to acknowledge the violence within and be healed by God’s mercy, becoming in turn an instrument of reconciliation.” Like Peter who recognized that he and his companions were frail followers, Francis is not calling us to be perfect but to be aware of the violence within us so that it can be transformed into the work of Christ. When Peter reminds us that Christ bore our sins he is indicating that Christ absorbed the evil unleashed on him without becoming a part of it. That is the freedom he offers his followers, the grace to deal with evil without succumbing to it.

In the enthusiasm of the first Easter the early Christians believed that anything was possible. They lived and proclaimed Jesus’ message even at the cost of their lives. They had enough faith to imitate Christ in bearing the sin of the world, confident that life and love triumph over every form of death. Pope Francis offers us concrete details about how we can do the same in our day. He invites us to apply the Beatitudes in our daily work, to show mercy by “refusing to discard people, harm the environment or seek to win at any cost” (from World Day of Peace 2017). He challenges us to “choose solidarity as a way of making history and building friendship in society,” showing that “unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict.”

On January 1, 2017, Pope Francis spoke in our name saying, “I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.” We are the church. Pope Francis has done no more than put vital contemporary content on Jesus’ command to go out to the whole world preaching the Gospel. We would not be mistaken to think that the mission of imitating Jesus and spreading his nonviolent way of confronting evil is more urgent today than at any time in history. He left us his tools and inspired many of our predecessors to use them. They have handed them over to us and our world awaits the assistance it has been promised.

ACTS 2:14a, 36-41

Luke tells us that Peter’s first homily about the risen Lord was longer than what he recorded. But the key is in the one verse: “Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified.” Luke tells us that line left the hearers “cut to the heart.”

The assumption is that the crowd hearing Peter had somehow participated in the events that led to the Crucifixion. Perhaps they were part of “the people” who had cried out for the release of Barabbas rather than Jesus and they were likely included among the bystanders who “went home beating their breasts” after Jesus’ death (Luke 22:13, 48). Peter’s message was that nothing is irredeemable — and who better than Peter to proclaim that message? Hearing Peter preach like this takes us back to the Last Supper scene when Jesus said that Peter’s faith would fail but added, “Once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Luke subtly returns us to the opening of his Gospel when he has the people ask the same question the crowds asked John the Baptist: “What are we to do?” Whereas John had called people to a water baptism and behavior that demonstrated repentance, Peter calls for repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. By citing that scene from the beginning of the Gospel, Luke invites his audience to reread the whole Gospel story in the light of the fact that God has made Jesus “both Lord and Christ.” The meaning of those titles that Luke introduced in the story of Jesus’ birth only becomes clear through the trajectory of his life.

When this crowd asks for baptism they are aware that it is in the name of the crucified and risen Lord, the one they rejected or betrayed. That very baptism will also reconcile them with Jesus and the Father and will be the opening through which they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit — the unique marker of Christian life. Asking for baptism meant that they were asking for a change in everything.

Peter's final exhortation is, "Be saved from this corrupt generation." He has brought home to the people how they misjudged Jesus and his message; he has brought them to understand that the resurrection is God's seal of approval on all that Jesus said and did. Now the invitation is to reject all the societal pressures that counter Jesus' message and to see in him the one through whom they and the world will be saved.

Luke doesn't wax on about how compelling Peter's message was. He simply says that 3,000 were added to the community on that very day. That says enough.

1 PETER 2:20b-25

The organizers of the Lectionary wisely began this selection *after* the indication that it was addressed first to household servants or slaves who had been beaten unjustly. The point of this part of the letter was to speak about how to deal with injustice, not how to be an obedient and patient underling. When we go beyond a first reaction to a discussion about how slaves (and later, wives) should behave, we realize that the author is citing the situation of the people lowest on the social ladder to represent not just Christians but Christ himself. We are all called to following the example of the lowly, despised, suffering servant.

No other part of the Christian Scripture makes such clear and conscious use of the Servant Song of Isaiah 53 to interpret Christ. This letter helps us to see how the early community searched their traditions to find a way to understand the mystery which had taken place among them and in each of them. In this passage, Peter takes that reflection into the realm of ethics or concrete action and articulates a reflection on the problem of the suffering of the innocent.

Peter is not talking about the suffering that results from bad choices like a traffic fine or incarceration for robbery. Nor is he dealing with the question of the suffering natural to the human condition such as disease, mortality, etc. The topic here is innocent suffering brought on precisely for doing good. This is the suffering to which

the prophets were subject; it's the suffering that can make it seem as if doing the right thing is a hopeless endeavor not worth what it will inevitably cost. Peter, the disciple who spent so much time and energy avoiding pain, says we are called to endure precisely this kind of suffering.

In discussing how to approach such suffering, Peter uses a rich image to speak of following Christ's example. The word we translate as "example" comes from the process of teaching people to write. The word *hupogrammus* (example) refers to the model students were to trace until they would be able to reproduce it independently. To drive that idea home Peter reminds the community that confronted with insults Christ didn't use his verbal power to retaliate, nor did he resort to threats or derision in the face of abuse. Jesus' responses to unjust persecution made it clear that he had far more faith in the love of God than in the power evil was unleashing in the attempt to put an end to him. Using this image of following the pattern of Christ's life, Peter calls on Christians to remember and contemplate Jesus' actions so that imitation of him becomes habitual, almost as instinctive as writing is to the scribe.

When Peter reminds us that Christ bore our sins on the cross he's calling us to continue Christ's saving action. Peter says that Christ's cross was a result of sin, but that he "bore" it; he took it on himself in a way that, rather than be defeated by it, transformed it into a deeper expression of love. His wounds healed sin by controverting sin's effects; to suffer without retaliation eviscerates evil, manifesting its powerlessness and ultimate inconsequence.

As commentator Reinhard Feldmeier (*The First Letter of Peter*) points out, Jesus' acceptance of suffering was not a stoic show of imperturbability or apathy, something that might have appealed to the high society of the day. To people who thought in the mode of Greek philosophy, who did not understand either his innocence or his mission, Christ's suffering appeared like weakness and defeat. The Christian alternative understands the cross as the ultimate expression of God's love for the very sinners who rejected him. The very opposite of stoicism, it was passion in the most emotional sense of the word.

When Peter calls innocent suffering a grace, he seems to be making the same point as Colossians 1:24: "In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." Christ is the model who has handed over his mission to us. As long as there is sin in the world, Christ's mission must be continued, and that will inevitably entail innocent suffering at the hands of evil. The last line of this selection reminds us that,

unlike Christ, we too have gone astray, but what defines us is not our sin but our belonging to Christ, our shepherd.

JOHN 10:1-10

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is traditionally “Good Shepherd Sunday,” but John 10:1-10 actually refers to Christ as the gate as much as the shepherd. John presents the idea of Jesus as Good Shepherd and gate immediately after the story of the man born blind. That emphasizes Christ as the entrance gate for the one who was driven out of the community and as the shepherd who defies the robbers while protecting the defenseless.

The audience of leaders who had debated with the once-blind man is the same group that hears Jesus talking about the brigands who try to enter the sheepfold from illegitimate positions. As John has built up to this incident near the end of Jesus’ active ministry, the tensions have grown between Jesus and the religious leaders and he has not held back in his critique of them. Now he contrasts the sort of pastor who expels the blind man with the one who calls his own by name, knows them and is therefore the only one they will follow.

One key that brings together the roles of Jesus as the gateway into safety and as the shepherd who cares for the sheep is that both focus on the good of the sheep. The conclusion of today’s reading summarizes the point of it all as Jesus says, “I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” When we hear that statement in light of the other readings we realize that as we receive the gift of his abundant life, our most genuine response will be to share it with everyone.

Planning: 4th Sunday of Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

Today brings us to the mid-point of the 50 days of Easter. Planners might evaluate how well the parish is maintaining the Easter spirit of joy and celebration.

Look around the worship space. Does the décor clearly indicate that we are still celebrating Jesus’ resurrection? Are the flowers as beautiful as they were on Easter Sunday? If not, do you need to rethink how Easter décor is handled, so that there are adequate resources to maintain the festive look throughout

the entire season?

Does the music chosen for today still clearly speak of Easter? Not every piece needs to be an Easter hymn, but there should be no doubt in anyone's mind what the main theme of this day is.

Since it's also the first Sunday in May, there may be a tendency to forget about Easter and focus on Mary. While it is certainly not inappropriate to include a Marian song, perhaps at the preparation of the gifts, Mary should not dominate the liturgy. Consider "Be Joyful, Mary" or any other hymn that links Mary to Easter. The opening song should be a strong Easter song to establish the main focus of the celebration right from the start. A good Easter hymn at the end of Mass helps people to carry the spirit with them as they move out into the wider world.

First Communion: The shepherd imagery in today's readings makes this a common day for celebrating first Communion. Whenever it is celebrated in your parish, planners might enter into conversation with the DRE or other religious educators to see what kind of mystagogy is offered to first communicants after their big day. Mystagogy is always important after sacramental celebrations but may be especially needed for young people who still need to grow in their understanding of and appreciation for the Eucharist.

Planners, catechists as well as preachers might also engage in a broader conversation about what kind of follow-up is offered after other sacraments. Are youngsters further assisted after first reconciliation to deepen their understanding of sin and the value of this sacrament? Are parents of baptized infants given help in the years after baptism to raise their children in the faith? That might begin simply by helping them reflect on the sacramental experience in the days following the baptism. What about couples married in the parish? Are they supported and challenged to grow in their appreciation of their sacrament after the wedding day?

This is not only the responsibility of liturgy planners but also catechists, pastors and those involved in spiritual formation. Mystagogy helps people learn to participate more fully in the celebration of God's love in the liturgy.

Prayers: 4th Sunday of Easter

By Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today's Gospel focuses on Jesus' identity as the shepherd using the familiar Hebrew Scripture imagery. Jesus is both the gate to the sheepfold and the shepherd willing to suffer for his flock. The invitation is to follow this wounded shepherd, knowing that we have been healed precisely by his wounds. In a world obsessed with power and strength, what image would motivate someone to follow him?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you identify yourself as the gate for the sheepfold: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are the protective shepherd whose voice conveys life: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to follow you that we might have life: Lord, have mercy.
- **Prayer of the Faithful**

Presider In a world where power speaks with a loud voice, we pray for all whose lives are endangered.

Minister For the church: that it may embody an alternate image to unbridled power ... we pray,

- For victims of war and violence, especially refugees, women and children ... we pray,
- For individuals and organizations that offer protection and safe haven to the vulnerable ... we pray,
- For those who belittle or threaten the weak and suffering, especially those who exhibit bullying behavior ... we pray,
- For those afraid to acknowledge their woundedness, and those who cannot find advocates ... we pray,
- For those who take risks to attend to the needs of others, especially in dangerous situations ... we pray,
- For hearts that are open to alternative expressions of power and strength ... we pray,
- For those preparing for first Communion and for their parents and educators ... we pray,
- For those who are sick, dying or vulnerable in any way; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God who leads, protects and beckons us, we pray for open ears to hear your voice in new and different ways. Help us to resist arrogance and the temptation

to reject vulnerability. Show us how to be open to the call of Jesus, the Shepherd, who comes to give us life. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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