

**Highlands United Church, North Vancouver**  
**75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Weekend Commemoration**  
**© The Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne**

Good morning, friends!

I trust that your afternoon yesterday was a meaningful time of commemoration and community building – and that you danced yourselves off your feet last night.

[Describe how I'm showing up]

Let us pray:

**Friends, let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your eyes. And may I never lightly presume to preach your word and may we never lightly presume to hear your Word, for in your Word is abundant life.**

Months ago, when Will and I were talking about the scripture reading for this morning, this reading from 1 Peter was the plan. This week when we checked in, Will made a comment – said “I went and read the text around this reading and it’s “ugh” – so let’s just stick with the verses we said.

It made me think that maybe we had chosen the wrong scripture verse for this morning.

But I also went back and re-read the whole chapter for context.

Immediately before the verses read this morning, the first 7 verses of this chapter of the letter in 1 Peter is problematic, but also insightful. It’s one of the passages of the bible that’s been used to uphold the oppression of women in marriage – it’s on husbands and wives. You know the one... it starts with “Wives, in the same way, be subject to your husbands...”

That gem follows a part of Chapter 2 with starts with “Slaves, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and gentle but also those who are dishonest.”

Lovely, right?

Yesterday I said there were questions I wanted us to rumble with... And this letter in the epistles definitely requires some rumbling. Filled with atonement theology – Jesus died for your sins, suffering in the name of what is good is holy – and be subject to the emperor and his governors – all feel super problematic. While the authorship of this particular letter is still keenly debated, it makes it hard to know how to interpret all of this. If Peter did not really author it, but someone in his name it could have been written late in the first century CE after the official Roman persecutions of Christians had started. But there are some who argue the persecutions were more like social stigma, and therefore Peter *could* have written it much earlier.

Whichever way you interpret it, like all the other epistles – the letters after the Gospel accounts and book of Acts in the Christian scriptures – this letter is fundamentally concerned with providing guidance on how we should live our lives as Christians. This letter has also provided some of the inspiration for much of the way we talk about our faith lives. That faith in Jesus, crucified and risen, should be the cornerstone of our lives, that we are to be as living stones built on the cornerstone of faith. That we are

a chosen people who choose ourselves to follow in the way of Jesus, living as servants to God and being willing to suffer the hardships of that cruciform living.

But this section in Chapter 3 on Husbands and Wives, if you get past the patriarchal contextual language, is about partnership. And the encouragement to suffer is not that suffering is glorified for its own sake, but that sometimes – a LOT of times, actually – doing the right thing is very, very hard.

The author of this letter is suggesting that in marriage we have the opportunity to make each other want to be better people. That by being present to marriage itself (which, contextually at the time, meant wives obeying their husbands) offers a chance to win over even those husbands who might not believe – and by the very thing we talked about yesterday – attraction rather than promotion.

The author of the letter writes this is important “even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct.”

The author is calling for alignment of our inner lives of faith and our outward conduct:

“Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; <sup>4</sup> rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight.”

Likewise, “Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman [...] they are joint heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.”

It is in the context of calling for the alignment of our inner faith and our outward conduct that the author of the letter then, just before our passage we heard this morning, calls us to be willing to suffer for what is right.

This section begins with:

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. <sup>9</sup> Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. <sup>10</sup> For

“Those who desire to love life  
and to see good days,  
let them keep their tongues from evil  
and their lips from speaking deceit;  
<sup>11</sup> let them turn away from evil and do good;  
let them seek peace and pursue it.  
<sup>12</sup> For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their prayer.  
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

Finally – all of you – have unity of spirit, sympathy – maybe today we would say the better term is empathy – love one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called...

I love this. When I read this passage and let my preconceived judgements about atonement theology fall away, I get excited about the possibility of grace and the fact that this faith of ours can change lives. I

get excited in a Renee Zellweger in Jerry Maguire kind of way where at the climax of the plot she confesses “I love him for the man he wants to be, and I love him for the man he almost is.”

It's like Will's friend – guy who studies bugs in amber – Oh – I know about being a hypocrite – I'm a Christian.

It is for this we are called – committed to being our very best selves even when the world around us gives us every reason not to...

THAT is the context of this passage this morning.

I want to read it again – because it's so important to this work of sorting out what it means have humility in our bold discipleship, but also to be bold in our humility.

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, <sup>[b]</sup> you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, <sup>[c]</sup> and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, <sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, <sup>[d]</sup> those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.”

I talked yesterday a lot about my thesis, and how we need humble boldness, but we also need to be bold in our humility, and there is a creative tension in holding these two things together. I talked about the importance of proclamation and sharing the good news of our faith in public witness – claiming our space as people of an inclusive, progressive lives of faith when the dominant public narrative around Christianity is largely dominated by more conservative voices. I advocated for humble boldness. But I wasn't very bold in my humility – I played to the crowd and made some quips about how its not about them being wrong and us being write – even though we are. That got some good laughs, but this passage calls us to let that go... “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is within you...”

I LOVE that... “be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is within you.”

This... THIS is the power of the progressive space in Christianity. Rather than using constrained and oppressive interpretations of our text as a weapon to make people marginal, as has so often been the case – we are called to provide an accounting for the hope that is within us, and to do it with gentleness and respect.

Because it's not about right or wrong – it's about being willing to share the good news of our faith and what keeps us hopeful even when the world feels like all hope is lost.

I wrote in my Easter article in Broadview magazine this spring the following accounting of my own work on the Flourishing project:

In doing this work, I've noticed a couple of things. The first is that some people light up with commitment and excitement about the possibilities of a renewing church. The second, much more

concerning, is that the church sometimes feels dispirited — or at least, individuals within the church do. There is an unwillingness to believe that change could be desirable, good or possible. There is grief over the loss of bustling buildings full of people on evenings and weekends, multiple Sunday school classes and public recognition that The United Church of Canada was important, not just to our members but also to Canadian society.

We are deeply blessed to live in Canada where, although we are not perfect, for the most part most of society lives in relative freedom and safety with at least some social foundations under our feet. While we still have a long way to go to ensure that the bodies of children, of black and brown women (both cis-gendered and trans), trans folk, targets of Antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crimes, Indigenous peoples, the poor, and people with disabilities have the same freedom and security as the rest of most of us, for the most part, our suffering doesn't take the form of actual persecution.

But we have a deep suffering of the spirit. To quote another 1990's romantic comedy — I have often said that the bad news stories remind me of a scene where Meg Ryan is scared of flying in the movie French Kiss. She's in a flight simulator and starts to panic and says "We're going down, we're going down, we're going down..."

That is the message we sometimes focus on — and to the cause of our suffering. The truth is our tradition — the Christian tradition — has never not been in a time of crisis and change. Not for 2,000 years. And that is one of the reasons why we need to stay focused on being an Easter people — being a people who Celebrate God's Presence, people of the new creed who know that we are not alone, we live in God's world. And that part of discipleship is making the church a place that is designed with our neighbours in mind.

Because we are called to account for the hope that is within us — with gentleness and respect. We can be bold disciples, in all humility, knowing that none of us is any better than the other, and that is the powerful force of humility at work. Is just knowing that we are neither better nor worse than anyone else — we are not God, even as we dedicate our lives to the triune God — and there is a liberation in knowing that.

May it be so — amen.