

**Message for Sunday, May 7, 2017**  
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church  
Betsy Headrick McCrae  
Scripture passage: 1 Peter 2:1-5, 9-25

### **It's complicated**

Contrary to what you see on your bulletin covers this morning – “With gladness and simplicity” – I’m here to tell you that sometimes reading the Bible – like all of life – is not simple. In fact, it’s complicated. That’s just what you wanted to hear, I know. We like things to be straightforward and easy to understand. Or, put another way, we want the way we understand things to be the way they really are.

But the way we understand things is often limited. It’s limited by our experience, our relative privilege, our place in society. It’s Mile’s law: “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” On April 29 at the Mountain States Mennonite Conference Faith and Life Forum, Dr. Drew Hart reminded us of the necessity of learning other people’s stories. We need a “thicker framework,” he said. In order to see beyond our limited perspective, we need let go of our desire for simplicity and learn to embrace and give credence to the complexity of what really is.

So, what does this have to do with reading the Bible? I’d like us to explore that question this morning by looking at the letter of 1 Peter, chapter 2. You can find this on page 984 in your red pew Bibles. It might be helpful to you to have this to refer to as we proceed.

In this chapter there is poetry; there are beautiful images that are familiar. They are precious to us and helpful in our walk of faith.

For instance, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” We sing this sometimes as we receive Communion. This comes from verse 3. We are fed and nourished by the

Word of God, which is our spiritual milk.

Our understanding of the church as a priesthood of all believers has roots in this chapter. Verse 5: “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.” And verse 9: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.” Our Anabaptist ancestors often quoted these verses as they challenged the prevailing understanding that priests and church hierarchy were necessary to connect people and God.

The beautiful words of Verse 10 remind us of who we are: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” We have been drawn into relationship with God and each other. We have been treated graciously – we have received mercy. We have been forgiven. As God’s people, therefore, we will live gracious and forgiving lives. This is at the core of our identity as people of faith. “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” This knowledge shapes how we interact with the world.

At the end of the chapter, verses 24 and 25, are words that echo throughout our hymns and sacred music: “Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” Christ bodily entered our human story. He shared the depth of our human experience, even pain and death. He did this to draw us near to God, to show us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. By his wounds we have been healed. We have seen and have come to know that God truly is the ever-present guardian

of our souls.

Yes, the poetry, the beautiful images of 1 Peter chapter 2 resonate with us. But what about the rest of this chapter? That's where things get complicated, I think. We're rolling along, nodding our heads and saying, "Uh-huh, uh-huh," when suddenly we're brought up short: "For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." (verses 13 and 14) And this is followed by another jolt: "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." (verse 18) Wow. What kind of advice is this? What does this have to do with being God's people, a priesthood of believers, a holy nation? How are we supposed to deal with this?

Remember Miles' law: "Where you stand depends upon where you sit." In this case, how we interpret, what we hear in these verses, depends on our station and position in life. We here at Glennon Heights are mostly white, middle- or upper-class, educated, and financially stable. We hear these words as citizens – fully legal, fully franchised – of the most powerful nation in the world. We hear these words as people who would much more likely be slave owners than slaves. We hear and interpret these words from a distance, really. A power distance. This has allowed us, or historically, folks like us, to use these words *against* those who less powerful, *against* folks who are at the mercy of a system which does not benefit them. We have used these words to keep them in their place, to uphold the status quo. "Follow the laws! Obey your masters! This is the will of God! It says so right here in the Bible!" That's what I hear happening when I read these words and it troubles me. I cringe. Is this God's intent?

But these words were not written to us who have power, who have a place in the heart of the system. These words were written to those on the margins, those without power. The early church was a motley collection of folks who had very little power in the society in which they lived. They were mostly resident aliens of provinces and an empire in which their status was always uncertain. Among them were servants and slaves at the mercy of their masters. They were nobodies, really. The dregs of society. But what they were doing – calling Jesus Lord, giving their allegiance to him instead of to the emperor, gathering in worshipping communities and encouraging each other – was dangerous and had to be stopped. They were subject to all kinds of persecution. This letter was written for these folks. Peter is deeply concerned about the attitudes and behaviors of believers in response to the hostility and suffering that they are experiencing. These words do not refer to hypothetical situations. They are not lessons in civic responsibility. For folks who were exiles and aliens, slaves and servants, they were, and are, real-life concerns.

I'm currently reading a book by Eric H. F. Law, entitled The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb, a Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community. Dr. Law writes about how differently folks who perceive that they have power or influence see the world from folks who feel they are powerless. Their needs are different, he says. In the church, if we truly are to be a body of Christ, folks who have societal power, need to recognize that they have power. They need to be willing to give it up, or give it away, he says. Folks who are powerless, on the other hand, need to receive power. They need to be encouraged, they need to gain strength and endure.

Let's look at these two problematic passages from 1 Peter through the eyes of

those who need to gain strength and endure. Listen to verses 13-17 through the ears not of a stable citizen, but of a vulnerable undocumented immigrant: “For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”

Even though you are not citizens with rights, Peter says, you are free people, God's people. Remember that that's your basic identity. Live into it. Live into it by honoring those around you. Honor even the humanly designed system which doesn't honor you. Hang in there. Don't act irresponsibly or maliciously. Instead hold onto what is true and right even in the midst of uncertainty and injustice. Be faithful in all that you say and do. God and the community of believers are with you.

Now listen to verses 18-22 through the ears not of a master but of someone caught in modern-day slavery or unpaid servitude, or through the ears of someone unjustly incarcerated: “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But 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, so that you should follow in his steps.”

Now, I'll be the first to admit that these are difficult words. Hard and troubling words. Where is the good news in this passage? There's no easy response. I'm not sure

exactly how to deal with this. But what I understand from reading particularly African American theologians, is that when suffering is real and unavoidable, when unjust punishment is a seemingly intractable fact of your life, when you have no power to change things, knowing that Jesus, too, suffered unjustly, helps you to endure. Knowing that God has entered into and is with you in this place of pain, hurt and horror, and deeply understands what you're going through, gives you hope. It helps you endure. It gets you through.

The gospel of Jesus Christ comes as a message of hope to the hopeless, encouragement to the discouraged and empowerment to the powerless. It is always life-giving, never death-dealing. It is never meant to keep people down or in their place. This is what needs to be front and foremost in our minds as we read the Bible. When don't see this in our interpretation, an alarm bell should go off. We are missing the point, and the message is being undermined. Going with what appears on the surface simplifies things, but that simplification can actually result in distortion, like slave owners holding these words over slaves, saying to them that this is God's will. Life is complicated and God doesn't dance around this. God speaks into complexity. God dwells in complexity. In order to dwell with God, we have to go there, too. We have to let go of our desire for easy answers. We have to accept uncertainty and discomfort. We have to take a hard look at ourselves. We have to be willing to enter into the story – to believe the validity of the story – from completely different, rather challenging points of view. In the words of Drew Hart, in order to really understand what is good news, we need a “thicker framework.”

This chapter from 1 Peter is challenging. I had to sit with it for a week and a half

before I was ready to come to terms with with all of it. I feel grateful for the poetry, for the images that inspire me and nourish my faith: Living stones; a royal priesthood; once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. These are beautiful words that I receive and cherish as gifts. And I am grateful, too, to have been brought face-to-face with my own dismissive assumptions, with the places where my understanding is limited, where I have blindness because of my societal power and place. I have learned – again – that in reading the Bible, I sometimes need to hold the discomfort, even to lean into it. I need to stop and wait – however impatiently – for Holy Spirit to take me where I need to go, trusting that that will be the case. That is the great secret of the Bible, of course. The Holy Spirit works within it. Of this I have no doubt.

Sisters and brothers, open your Bibles. Then open your eyes, open your hearts, open your minds to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will take you into unexpected places. This will change your life and feed your soul. Amen.