

Year A

1 Peter 2:18-25

Howard Thurman in his autobiography recalled the day when he visited Daytona Beach with his little daughters:

“We sauntered down the long street from the church to the riverfront. This had been the path of procession to the baptismal ceremony in the Halifax River..... At length we passed the playground of one of the white public schools. As soon as Olive and Anne saw the swings, they jumped for joy. ‘Look, Daddy, let’s go over and swing!’ This was the

inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face sooner or later. What do you say to your child at the critical moment of primary encounter?

‘You can’t swing in those swings.’

‘Why, Daddy?’

‘When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you.’ When we had had our lemonade, Anne pressed for the answer, ‘We’re home now, Daddy. Tell us.’

I said, ‘It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. Only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts,

the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida - it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging on those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls.”¹ The lectionary reading assigned to

¹ Thurman, Howard 1979 *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. p.97

be read from 1 Peter today omits verse 18, the natural beginning to the passage. That doesn't make any sense to me. Could it be that the lectionary committee have concluded that some Bible verses should never be read aloud in public? "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh".² It's one thing for that verse to be read aloud to people living in first century Asia Minor where many of the early Christians were slaves, held by pagan masters, but what

² 1 Peter 2:18 *NRSV*

about that verse being read one hundred and fifty years ago in the United States and the Confederacy as the majority of Christians sought to use the Biblical text to justify slavery? What about the woman trapped in a violent marriage who feels that the only option available to her is to endure terrible suffering? It's the plain reading of Scripture after all, isn't it? It's a dangerous concept: the plain reading of Scripture. So all that follows in the passage, and none of that is easy either, depends upon the interpretation of this difficult verse 18. How was it that suffering under terrible tyranny and

enslavement the African American slaves could offer an alternative to the plain reading of Scripture that not only challenged it but completely trumped it? The answer to that question will help us to interpret the remainder of the passage.

An old story related to the life of St. Francis of Assisi is worth telling here:

“One day at St. Mary’s, blessed Francis called Brother Leo and said: ‘Brother Leo write.’ He responded: ‘Look, I’m ready!’ ‘Write,’ he said, ‘what true joy is.’

‘A messenger arrives and says that all the Masters of Paris have entered the Order.

Write: this isn't true joy! Or, that all the prelates, archbishops and bishops beyond the mountains, as well as the King of France and the King of England have entered the Order. Write: this isn't true joy! Again, that my brothers have gone to their non-believers and converted all of them to the faith; again that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and perform many miracles. I tell you true joy doesn't consist in any of these things.'

'Then what is true joy?'

'I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night. It's winter time, muddy, and

so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs and blood flows from such wounds. Freezing, covered with mud and ice, I come to the gate and, after I've knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: 'Who are you?' 'Brother Francis,' I answer. 'Go away!' he says. 'This is not a decent hour to be wandering about! You may not come in!' When I insist, he replies: 'Go away! You are simple and stupid! Don't come back to us again! There are men of us here like you - we don't need you!' I stand again at the door and say: 'For the love of God, take me in

tonight!’ And he replies: ‘I will not! Go to the Crozier’s place and ask there!’

‘I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this.’³

That’s an inspirational story but one we must be careful with. It would be a mistake to valorise suffering to justify the oppression of the powerless as it would be a mistake to encourage the overzealous to seek suffering for its own sake. There must be a way

³ Armstrong, Short & Hellman eds. 2002 *Francis of Assisi: The Saint: Early Documents*, Vol 1 (New York: New York City Press) p.166

forward here that is faithful to the way of Jesus Christ, and there is. If all the law is summed up in the commandment to love the Lord your God with all that you have and to love your neighbour as yourself, then anything that pulls down or diminishes your neighbour must be challenged. The overall way of Christ trumps the individual verses that some may be keen to pull out of Scripture to justify oppression. Therefore the overall message of Scripture in telling the story of the Son of God's sufferings identifies with the poor, the weak and the oppressed and declares itself to be emphatically on

their side. So remembering the story of St Francis and the obstructive doorkeeper we are led not to dwell on the suffering itself but instead on the delight that the individual finds in following closely the way of Christ. There is true freedom in that apparent enslavement. Peter is calling us to participate in the calling of Jesus: to embrace his way as the best and so to experience Jesus' love as Shepherd and not slave master.

We must not kid ourselves today that the options before us are either an enslavement to the Good Shepherd or a freedom to do as

we please. That's to miss the heart of the message. We don't have slave masters standing over us. But we have countless more ways of falling into slavery today than Peter could ever have imagined. Our own inclinations, our will to pursue our desires takes us into slavery and away from the shepherd who wishes to care for us. Peter would want us to be realistic about the trials and sufferings that will inevitably come our way if we make disciplined decisions to follow Christ's way. It costs, as it cost him who gave his life for us. But he is willing to

help us and so we trust that we will pursue
his way.