PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Leaven

Volume 20
Issue 3 *What About 1 Peter*

Article 10

1-1-2012

Living Fathfully at the Margins: A Communion Meditation on 1 Peter 2.18-25

Christopher Chesnutt
christopher.chesnutt@pepperdine.edu

Living Faithfully at the Margins: A Communion Meditation on 1 Peter 2.18–25

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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. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth. When He was abused, He did not return abuse; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but He entrusted Himself to the one who judges justly. He 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. (1 Peter 2.18–25, NRSV)

During World War II, Nobel Peace Prize Winner Elie Wiesel was a fifteen-year old prisoner in the Nazi death camp at Buna. A cache of arms belonging to a Dutchman had been discovered at the camp. The man was promptly shipped to Auschwitz. But he had a young servant boy: a child with a refined and beautiful face, unheard of in the camps. He had the face of a sad angel. The little boy, like his Dutch master, was cruelly tortured, but would not reveal any information. So the SS sentenced the child to death, along with two other prisoners who had been discovered with arms. Wiesel tells the story:

> One day, when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all around us; machine guns trained; the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains—and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel.
>
> The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.
>
> This time, the camp captain refused to act as executioner. Three SS replaced him.
>
> The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.
>
> The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.
>
> "Long live liberty!" cried the two adults.
>
> But the child was silent.
>
> "Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.
>
> At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.
>
> Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.
>
> "Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.
>
> "Cover your heads!"

> Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive…
>
> For more than half an hour, he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.
>
> Behind me, I heard the same man asking, "Where is God now?"
>
> And I heard a voice within me answer him:
>
> "Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging there on this gallows… "[1]

According to the opening verses of 1 Peter, Peter writes his epistle to Christians living out on the geographic fringes of the Roman world and away from the support of the larger communities of Christians. In spite of their marginalized status—and the severe hostility and persecution that comes along with it—Peter's encouragement to these "aliens, strangers, and exiles" (1 Pet 2.11) is strong: you do have an identity, you do belong, your salvation is in God, your lives are full of purpose and forever secure in God. In 1 Peter 2.11–25, Peter begins a whole new section in his epistle by addressing the believer's conduct in the midst of a hostile and unbelieving world. He begins by addressing enemy number one: the passions of human flesh (2.11). He then exhorts believers to walk in holiness and integrity before the eyes of a watching world (2.12). He first connects this exhortation to the governing authorities (2.13–17). Living in reverent obedience and full submission to God, believers are set free to honor the authorities that they may be silenced in their reviling and rejection of Christ, the ultimate authority. He then connects this exhortation to believing servants/slaves (2.18–25). He calls upon servants/slaves to submit and show proper respect to their masters, even if this means enduring unjust treatment. This instruction is grounded in a principle that is applicable to all believers: the call to patiently and steadfastly endure suffering for doing what is good and right is itself grounded in the reality that we are called by a Savior who himself suffered on our behalf, though he was innocent of any wrongdoing.

We may never experience the horrors of Nazism as Elie Wiesel and his companions did, but we do find ourselves under constant pressure to conform to the patterns and the ways of the surrounding culture. For instance, I am gravely concerned when I hear calls from certain quarters for Christians to "take back the United States of America for the kingdom of God." The underlying premise here is that believers are to be primarily concerned with "Christianizing" the surrounding world so that everybody "likes us." I am all for preaching the gospel to unbelievers and standing up for what is good and right, of course, but I am not at all interested in the Christian message being tangled up with the institutions and powers of this present age (which are passing away anyway). If church history has taught us anything, it is that the mixing of Christianity and nationalistic concerns is a lethal proposition. (Ironically enough, it's been the so-called "Christian nations" who've been guilty of some of the worst atrocities in human history: inquisitions, crusades, holocausts, genocides, the mistreatment of Native Americans, the enslavement of African-Americans and so on!) To follow in the way of Jesus is not a call to return North America—or, for that matter, any other nation—to being a "Christian civilization." Rather, to follow in the way of Jesus is live faithfully to him and his example in the midst of a hostile and unbelieving world—at the margins—and yes, to sometimes experience the fires of pain for doing so. But Jesus reminds us that no servant is greater than his master. So if our Master, with whom we commune at table this Lord's Day, has patiently endured suffering and overcome it—and even now, meets us in the midst of our suffering, as the cross declares—then by following in his footsteps, so shall we! Eliza E. Hewitt, the nineteenth century hymn writer, says it best:

1. Elie Wiesel, Night, in *The Night Trilogy*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Hill & Wang, 1987), 71–72.

Let us, then, be true and faithful
Trusting, serving everyday
Just one glimpse of Him in glory
Will the toils of life repay![2]

Thanks be to God!

Christopher Chesnutt serves as the interim preacher at the Pasadena Church of Christ in Pasadena, California (christopher.chesnutt@pepperdine.edu).

2. http://nethymnal.org/htm/w/w/wwag2hvn.htm (accessed August 27, 2012).