

1 Peter 2:18-3:6

¹⁸ Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.

²² "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

²³ 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. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, ^[h] so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds ^[i] you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

3 Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, ² when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³ Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; ⁴ 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. ⁵ It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. ⁶ Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

Imagine

When Pastor Lia asked me to preach today, she said I could choose the scripture instead of using the lectionary text. I told her she might regret that idea.

Some of you might be regretting it, too. You should have seen your faces when Eve was reading!

Let me ask y'all a question: Who has read this passage before?
Who knew the Bible tells enslaved people to obey their masters?
Who knew the Bible tells women to shut up and listen to their husbands?

There are a lot of difficult texts like this in our Scriptures. Scholars even have a name for this type of passage, the Household Codes.

The ancient Greeks and Romans had this idea that there was a natural order for households. The father was at the top of this hierarchy, the ultimate authority. Below him were his sons, then his wife, then his other children, then, at the VERY BOTTOM, the slaves he held.

Over time, this idea became foundational for Roman society. The Empire became a global household, with the emperor as its father. Below him were the wealthy, landowning elite, followed by merchants, then low-class workers, then enslaved folks and conquered peoples.

EVERYTHING reflected this hierarchy. Aristotle wrote that it derived from a person's essence. Powerful men had excellent characters. Women were morally frail; they depended on their husbands for protection and formation. Enslaved people were naturally "slavish," weak and devious.

The Jesus movement developed in that context. In the last few decades of the first century—about the same time as our Gospels were being written—the author of First Peter writes to a big group of "exiles and resident aliens" in the eastern stretches of the Empire.

Well, they weren't REALLY exiles or immigrants. Commentators say the author instead "socially constructs a different reality"—the women and men, the enslaved folks and slaveholders he wrote to were citizens of the Kingdom of God exiled in the Roman Empire. But some of them lived in mixed households—THEY were Christians, but their husbands or masters were NOT. So, in this household code, the author has to negotiate between God's subversive justice on the one hand and the hierarchical Roman order on the other.

And, as we heard, the author spiritualizes God's vision for justice meant for the "real world." He proposes a sort of Marxist religion, an "opiate of the masses." When the enslaved accept corporal punishment as the norm, and even patiently endure beatings with no cause, they find favor with God. Women find favor with God when they blindly obey their husbands with no regard for their own human flourishing and spiritual development.

So, there it is. What do we DO with this text, and others like it? What do we do with a text that justifies oppression? A text that not only condones a brutalizing system of enslavement, but encourages enslaved bodies to cooperate with it and submit to it?

It would be all too easy to just ignore it. Why read THIS in church when we could hear a nice, familiar Gospel story instead?

And that's what usually happens. These texts have been hidden so well, most of us didn't even know that they are there. Even I hadn't read it until I started seminary.

But I think it's important to read these parts of Scripture that make us uncomfortable, that make us squirm a little in our seats. We should read these because we need to be reminded of the power our Scriptures hold, that our interpretations of Scripture holds. White Christians need to be reminded that our ancestors appealed to the Bible to enslave people and exclude them from fellowship as full siblings in Christ.

We also NEED to read these texts because they provide us with a unique view into the past. Verses like this can serve as a Godly crystal ball, if you will. We just need a little imagination to see it.

A lot of us think of the Bible as a history book. We got past thinking the Earth was created in six 24-hour days. Maybe we realized the Flood could be symbolic instead of literal. But, on the whole, we don't really question the Bible.

But that doesn't make a lot of sense, since most of the New Testament is arguments. These letters represent one person's voice responding to communities in disagreement over big, controversial questions. They declare that things SHOULD BE one way, not that things ARE this way. And not everyone in the communities that received them agreed, so not everyone followed the instructions of some far-away "apostle."

Let's imagine WHY the author thought he needed to write this. There were probably some enslaved women and men who were fed up with being beaten and sold into sex work without their consent. Perhaps some of the same enslaved folks served as preachers and teachers and leaders in the assembly. Maybe they ran away to be with the women who had divorced their husbands and owned their own homes, the women who weren't afraid of speaking up in church when they disagreed with a letter. And they probably looked REALLY good while they were at it.

The author heard about all this and had to give his 2 cents. He wanted to share the Gospel, to "tend to the flock of God" as he put it. But, unfortunately, he compromises with the natural order we talked about earlier. He constructs what one scholar calls a "slaveholder morality," telling slaves to submit and be complacent instead of striving for their God-given freedom and dignity.

He lacked the imagination to see a different way—the way of God, the way of God's kingdom.

Friends, we need that imagination today. As the church, God calls us to practice for the new creation marked by God's expansive love and social justice. We can't do that without imagining that things can be radically different than what we see going on around us—that things ALREADY ARE radically different.

I heard an example of this imagination when I attended the Alliance of Baptists gathering a few weeks ago. One of the workshop facilitators said that she owed her entire existence as a black woman to her enslaved ancestors. They were able to imagine a better, more just future. And they risked everything to make it happen.

We need that imagination. We need the imagination of Central American immigrants who saw poverty and violence around them. They thought of the United States and imagined a life of opportunity and safety—then they risked everything. They left behind everything they knew to travel hundreds of miles for a chance at a new life.

We need that imagination. We need the imagination of the Poor People's Campaign and its vision of a moral revival that demands justice for all. Their demonstrators—including our own Pastor Lia—put their own bodies on the line, risking arrest to proclaim that vision.

Friends, we need imagination. Thankfully, it's not all up to us. Both in the text and in today, we see glimpses of hope and liberation. The author of First Peter may advise enslaved people to submit, but he also likens their example to that of Christ. Not the slaveholders, not the church elders, but the ENSLAVED FOLKS reflect Christ's life and work.

How can we see Christ in the people that society and the Church has pushed into the margins? Last week, Pastor Lia asked you all to share some ideas about how we can use our "collective brilliance" to make a difference. Now that those creative juices are flowing, let's imagine a new and better world. And let's do everything we can to make it happen.

Jesus imagined a new and better way. "Turn around!" he said. "The kingdom of God is at hand." Through his teaching and his miracles, he showed us what the kingdom looked like. He followed the conviction of his imagination all the way to his execution by the state.

On the night before he died, he used his imagination to show us God's new creation again. He shared a meal with his disciples. After he gave thanks, he took the bread and broke it. He gave it to his friends and said, "Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body, given up for you."

In the same way he took the cup, he blessed it, and said, "Take this, all of you, and drink it. This is my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, poured out for you and for all. Do this in remembrance of me."

By sharing all we have and inviting all to the table, we remember and celebrate Christ and his imagination.