**“Hopeful Working”**

1st Peter 2:18-25

“Sympathy, Harold, it’s a Greek word. It means to suffer. ‘I sympathize with you.’ It means, ‘I suffer with you.’”

This quote comes from the movie *42*, the story of Jackie Robinson. It’s the story of the first African American to integrate Major League Baseball. And this statement about sympathy was made by Branch Rickey, the President and General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1940s. A couple of years earlier, Harold, another Dodgers executive, had suggested that Branch Rickey was “out of his mind” in his plan to integrate Major League Baseball. But after witnessing the degrading persecution of Jackie Robinson by the manager of the Philadelphia Phillies, Harold stormed into Branch Rickey’s office after the game and said, “I’m going in that dugout tomorrow, and I’m going to wring Ben Chapman’s neck!”

But Branch Rickey explained to Harold, “That Philadelphia manager is doing me a service. He’s creating sympathy on Jackie’s behalf.” And then he pointed out the irony of the fact that Ben Chapman was the manager of the *Philadelphia* Phillies. “Philadelphia,” said Branch Rickey, “is also a Greek word. It means brotherly love.”

The movie *42* does an almost perfect job of proclaiming the message of today’s reading from 1st Peter. Sometimes in life, and specifically in our careers, it may be necessary to suffer persecution, but, “being aware of God,” our vocational suffering can be redemptive.

Now, we need to be very careful with this morning’s scripture reading, because it has been carelessly abused in the past. Our scripture reading begins with the rather harsh and seemingly insensitive words, “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference.” During the time of slavery in our country, this morning’s scripture reading was one of the primary texts used to substantiate and legitimize the Institution of Slavery.

“There it is, right there, in the words of scripture. ‘Slaves, accept the authority of your masters.’ See, slavery is God’s will. That’s just how God made the world, and this is just how God intends the world to be.”

Now, that may be how this text was interpreted and sometimes preached, but that is not the point of this passage. Just to be clear, so my phone doesn’t ring off the hook tomorrow—1st Peter is not substantiating and legitimizing the Institution of Slavery. Let me explain.

1st Peter was written to Christians living in Asia Minor in the earliest days of the Christian Church, and many of these Christians were from the outer socio-economic edge of society. Some early Christians were slaves. Specifically, in this passage, 1st Peter is speaking to household slaves whose owners were not Christians, and the passage also seems to suggest that their owners were not at all happy with their slaves’ new religion. And that is probably the cause of the masters’ “harsh” and unjust treatment of their slaves.

At the time when this letter was written, there was nothing that could be done to overthrow slavery, and in fact, any rebellion or even resistance would have resulted in the slave’s immediate death, and probably the annihilation of all Christians. So, under these circumstances, 1st Peter is saying, “Slaves [for now], accept the authority of your masters with all deference.”

The Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a … time for every matter under heaven… a time to break down and a time to build up … a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones … a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

Some people with power, people who like to abuse power, love to reference passages like this morning’s reading. “Christians shouldn’t resist when they are abused. All Christians should suffer in silence, like Jesus.” And following this misguided interpretation of scripture, the church has sometimes counseled abused women to remain with their violent husbands no matter what, or sexually harassed employees are pressured to suffer in silence, like Jesus.

Sometimes, with the best of intentions, the church has offered unhelpful and often hurtful advice to the powerless. But you know what? Jesus was not silent about the injustice he witnessed in his life and ministry. Actually, it was his words and deeds challenging the injustice of his day that set Jesus at odds with the powerbrokers of his day, and that’s a big part of what ultimately led to his crucifixion. There is a time for suffering in silence when there is no other choice, but there is also a time to speak out against oppression and injustice.

Like Jackie Robinson, the slaves in the first-century church had no alternative but to suffer in silence, but it’s also important to understand that, like Jackie Robinson, their suffering had a purpose. Using a phrase from our reading: “Being aware of God,” they believed that their suffering would be redemptive.

When Branch Rickey first met Jackie Robinson, Jackie asks, “You want a player who doesn’t have the guts to fight back?”

“No, no,” replies Branch Rickey, “I want a player who has the guts not to fight back. People aren’t going to like this,” Branch Rickey continues. “They’re going to do anything to get you to react. Echo a curse with a curse, and they’ll hear only yours. Follow a blow with a blow, and they’ll say ‘The Negro lost his temper. The Negro doesn’t belong.’ We win if the world is convinced of two things—that you are a fine gentleman and a great baseball player. Like our Savior, you’ve got to have the guts to turn the other cheek.”

Now, about halfway through our scripture reading, Biblical scholars agree that there is a change in the intended audience. 1st Peter is no longer just speaking to household slaves. You see, there are several verses in 1st Peter that reminds us all that our true freedom is found in our mutual slave-like devotion to Christ. Now, addressing all Christians, 1st Peter proclaims: “For this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.”

If you are a Christian, then you too are called to pick up your cross and follow in the footsteps of your savior. And sometimes this may mean speaking out against injustice in your workplace, but be aware that when you do, the people who benefit from the injustice aren’t going to like it, and you may suffer. But, “Being aware of God,” Christians are never called to return abuse for abuse. As 1st Peter proclaims, “When [Jesus] suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”

Once again, *42* gives us a great example of “entrust[ing ourselves] to the one who judges justly.” Branch Rickey receives a phone call from the General Manager of the Philadelphia Phillies, who says that his team will not play if Jackie Robinson comes with the Dodgers to play in Philadelphia. Branch Rickey responds: “You think God likes baseball, Herb? … Someday you’re going to meet God, and when [God] inquires why you didn’t take the field against Robinson, and when you answer that it was because he was [black], it may not be a sufficient reply.”

The Easter hope of the resurrection changes us and changes our world. It changes our values, our understanding of life, and our sense of hope for the future, if not in this world, certainly in the world to come. If the power of God was strong enough to raise Jesus from the dead, overcoming the powers of darkness who crucified him, then the hope of Easter is that our God can overcome the powers of darkness in our lives and in our world today.

My friends, in our jobs, our labor, our vocation—whether we work in our homes as caregivers to our children, whether we are retired and work as volunteers, whether we study and work in the classroom, or whether we are employed in the marketplace—our Christian vocation provides us an opportunity to witness to the hope that is ours in our risen Lord. For Jackie Robinson, who was a Methodist, this meant being “a fine gentleman and a great baseball player.” For you, this means being honest and ethical, hardworking and productive, being just and calling for justice in the marketplace, in our homes, in our schools, and in our world.

Only a few verses before our scripture reading this morning, 1st Peter proclaimes, “Conduct yourselves honorably … so that … [people] may see your honorable deeds and glorify God … For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As slaves of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.”

Sometimes in life, and specifically in our careers, it may be necessary to suffer persecution, but, “being aware of God,” our vocational suffering can be redemptive.

Let us pray:

O God of the Resurrection, fill us with faith and Easter hope and empower us to live honorable lives that bring glory to you. Amen.

David A. Cagle

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6th Sunday of Easter