

May 3, 2020

"Simon Says: 'Therefore' "

1 Peter 1:13-2:3

I think it's good to play Simon says and even better to know what Simon Says; what he wrote in the letter we call 1 Peter. Continuing our journey with Simon/Peter (a journey that began in Lent) means we also get to learn from someone very flawed like us (who understands failure), but who also clearly experienced the kind of growth trajectory in his faith any one of us would want to emulate. He went from hopeless on Good Friday and Silent Saturday to having a hope that wasn't dead at all; something he would later call a "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3) in this, his first letter.

Reading through 1 Peter also means we can learn about following Jesus in the context of "suffering" and difficulty. Suffering takes place on multiple levels. I'm not suggesting that Peter's multiple references to suffering in any way resembles what we are calling a health and economic crisis. The "scattered" (v.1) he addresses this letter to are also the "battered and persecuted." This is before Nero's brutal and systematic persecution, which began around 65 AD when Peter actually died, but Christians were already being persecuted and pushed down for their transformed living which no longer fit in with the agreed upon values and lifestyle of their Greco-Roman culture. They were paying a price for living the Jesus life; and this still happens today in many places on our planet. Although that's not the suffering we are seeing all around us today, suffering of any kind (financial, physical, emotional) has a way of chipping away at our hope and tempting us to believe that following Jesus isn't worth the pain and the effort of remaining faithful no matter what. I trust there will be extra nuggets of encouragement in this letter for those of us who currently face suffering and discouragement, or will in the very near future. **[Read 1 Peter 1:13-2:3]**

We can get way too preoccupied with the theoretical and never get practical; overly fixated on the abstract without ever getting concrete. But we can also be so practically-minded that we never think of the bigger picture, or the pivotal hook on which our practical lives hang. We can so quickly demand 'steps to take' that we forget why we're walking in the first place. We can find out what we're supposed to do but forget the "Why?" . . . which Jason helped us see last week.

That's why there's nothing like a "**Therefore**" followed by good old practical guidelines. Any time we come across a "Therefore," we get to ask "What is this a response to?" "What is the foundational reality that what I'm about to hear stems from?" "What's the springboard for the following practical stuff?" "Therefore" keeps us from either getting lost in the theoretical or trapped in certain behaviors/actions without a foundation.

We want a marriage manual of "how to's" without understanding that – at its core – marriage is a mystery, created by God to help us experience His unconditional love more tangibly, and

reflect that love to others more visibly. [By the way, this was not the bigger picture or my "Why?" when I got married.] We need to do more than discover our spouse's "love language" and get along better, or learn when to not give advice and just listen (which is almost always). Although both those discoveries and skills will help us deepen our love and help our spouse experience it, we need to find clear ways to express our love to our spouse and we need to practice active listening because that's what God is like in His love to us. The "Therefore" stems from something bigger. But without the "therefore" we might be tempted to think we don't have to find ways to show our spouse we love them with the love of Christ. [Peter actually talks about marriage in chapter 3. Stay tuned!]

Another example of being too practically-minded would be wanting to learn wise financial principles to establish fiscal margins and better get through a crisis like this pandemic, without going deeper to grasp God's generosity to us in Christ and His call to be ridiculously generous, recognizing all we have belongs to Him. And yet, we do want to be practically-minded with our money, obeying God's financial mandates in real time SO THAT we can be more generous like Him. We want to do this when it comes to what the Bible says about all kinds of behaviors and moral codes of conduct: what we say, how we do our jobs and relate to those we work with, and how we lead Christ's Church. Peter talks about all of this, and more, in his letter to those "scattered and exiled" all over a world hostile to those following Christ.

Peter's "Therefore" gives us both a big picture and something(s) 'more specific.' It sets us on a path with a bigger underpinning AND makes us squirm, in that we have to actually DO something. In some ways, the rest of Peter's first letter is a "Therefore" – as is our entire life of discipleship. Peter is asking, what are the practical implications for the foundational truth of the first half of chapter 1: that we have been "given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and an inheritance that won't perish, spoil or fade." (1 Peter 1:3-4) Based on that reality, Simon says, "Therefore" . . .

And the first thing he lands on is: Holiness – which is a huge category with a lot of smaller, very practical subcategories. I don't think it would surprise you if I said HOLINESS IS NOT A VERY POPULAR TOPIC OR WORD THESE DAYS; and there may be some justified reasons for people being turned off by the subject. But the holiness Peter is talking about isn't being 'holier than thou.' It's not a moralistic 'to-do list' apart from the very humbling grace and mercy of God which He gave as a pure, unearned gift. Holiness isn't just following a list of random rules disconnected from who God is and the life of hope He made possible in the resurrected Jesus. The kind of holiness Peter is calling us to requires us to **"prepare [our] minds for action; discipline [ourselves]; set all [our] hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring when He is revealed."** (1 Peter 1:13) Peter then urges the Church to remember the former calling God gave His peculiar people to live a pure, reverent and set-apart life. He gives us an even bigger picture when he quotes God's invitation-command in the Old Testament: **"Be holy for I am holy."** (1 Peter 1:16 – quote from Leviticus 11:44, 45 and 19:2) Jesus, who knew all

that the Old Testament said about God's holiness (and Leviticus 11 and 19) uses the word "perfect" in His Sermon on the Mount in the context of talking about the holy love we are called to show – even to our enemies. "Be perfect, THEREFORE, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) Love people in thoughtful, disciplined, and hope-filled ways . . . all the time. I don't know very many people who would have a problem with that kind of holiness, do you? ["Those darn Christians, they are always loving in such thoughtful, disciplined and hope-filled ways!"]

Holiness is about being set apart, distinct. Peter calls followers of Jesus to be "non-conforming" (v.14) and "live as strangers" (v.17), instead of just going along with what everyone says is conventional or acceptable; even 'religiously conventional and acceptable.' He calls us to live with "reverent fear" (v.17); not a fear that makes us cower and run from God but a healthy awe and respect for who God is and what God has determined a life of hope ought to look like. Peter said that our life was ransomed from the "futile ways we inherited from those who came before us." (1 Peter 1:18) In other words, we are given the gift of living holy lives; we GET TO live in a set apart and distinct way.

And this holy life Peter is calling the Church to is meant to be a grateful response to the reality that we have already been ransomed with the very life and "blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:19). One of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition is that all of our obedience is merely a response to what our holy God has already done. We don't live holy lives SO THAT God will love us more [which is how I lived the first 15 years of my Christian faith – which, by the way will crush you]. We live holy lives because our holy God loved us first and because we want to point others to our holy God, who claims people as His own. The Good News of God's grace always comes before our good works – and our good, practical lives. Holiness doesn't make us better than anyone else; it's not about showing off; it's about reflecting the greatness (set-apartness) of God, so others can come to know Him too.

Peter also reminds us that holiness impacts real relationships. Peter doesn't just say, 'be generically and abstractly holy,' but "**love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22)** in real ways. He spells out some of those loving ways by telling us what NOT to do at the beginning of chapter 2. "**THEREFORE, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." (1 Peter 2:1)** In other words, you don't get to treat each other like everyone else who is always trying to one-up others, ripping into everyone, being two-faced just to get ahead and increase your applause meter. Peter says, holy loving means that all that unloving and unholy stuff has to go, which doesn't come as naturally as we'd like to think.

So where do we discover what this distinct and set apart (holy) life of love looks like? It still sounds a little abstract. Peter reminds us that the source of this very practical life of love comes from an authority outside ourselves; he calls it "**the living and enduring Word of God." (1 Peter 1:23)** He quotes from Isaiah 40 and reminds us that all of our human thoughts and ideas

come and go like grass in the field and flowers in the garden, but "the word of the Lord endures forever." (1 Peter 1:25; from Isaiah 40:8) The Bible gives us the practical 'how-to's' of love, AND shows us the big picture of God's love from Creation to final Redemption/Restoration of all things.

In the same way that holiness isn't the most popular topic these days, it's also not en vogue to suggest that there is an eternal and authoritative word from God, or anyone else. Again, people have used God's Word as a weapon and made it harder to hear without suspicion. We've turned it into a manual for living more than a love story of redemption and renewal that a God of grace and truth made visible in the holy life of His only Son. We've used God's Word to justify our own sin instead of living lives that invite justice to roll down like a mighty river and ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

But what if we could help people understand that God's Word is FOR them? That the love of God is unlike anyone or anything else? That God's Word is full of "good news?" (1 Peter 1:25)

And what if what people saw in us was such a set apart and distinct life of love and holiness that they were drawn in and wanted to know the source of our nourishment and transformation?

Peter says God's Word is always reliable, full of Good News, and loaded with truth about holy living. And he writes to all these followers of Christ, who were – no doubt – discouraged at times, that they should be "like newborn infants, [who] long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." (1 Peter 2:2-3) Eugene Peterson translates it like this: **"Now, like infants at the breast, drink deep of God's pure kindness. Then you'll grow up mature and whole in God."** (from *The Message*).

If, like Peter, we can – over time – become mature, whole, and holy people, then others will get a glimpse of God that is compelling and life-changing . . . or they'll reject it and reject us and we might even suffer a little from their rejection; or we might not get the promotion because we decided to tell the truth to our customer; or we might have less because we give more away; or we might even be judged for choosing a more distinct (HOLY) lifestyle.

But if we just fit in and live like everyone else . . . if we crave and thirst for what everyone else is feeding on . . . so that we grow up to be just like everyone else . . . then people will never know there is a God who is set apart, distinct, and one-of-a-kind. Holy!

That's what Isaiah heard the angels sing about God in the temple (Isaiah 6), and that's what were told those gathered around the throne sing continuously about God (Revelation 4:8): "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty . . . the whole earth is full of His glory . . . the One who was, and is, and is to come."

For the glory of God and the good of all, let's "Take Time To Be Holy."