

Take a Bow

I Peter 2: 13-3:7

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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At a rehearsal dinner in August, I was seated next to a pastor who had known the bride for years. He was co-officiating the wedding with me. As we got to know each other, he asked me how long I had been married. Then he asked me “What’s the secret to a long marriage?” Immediately one word popped up and out. “Submission.” My submission, not hers. Not a servile, groveling submission. But a consistent choosing of what would please Rhonda, even if it’s not my first preference. This, over time strengthens love and creates fulfillment.

I realized I’ve learned a lot by making the coffee most days. She wants me to use the filtered water. It takes about 3 times longer to fill the pot from the filtered water than from the tap. I hold the coffee pot in my hand. She’s not around. Tap or filtered water? Will I take the extra 20 seconds to do what she asks? That little choice to submit accumulates through the days, the months and the years. It’s a habit of freely choosing to give over my will for the sake of another. And remarkably, contrary to all my adolescent instincts, serving someone else and not myself is indeed the way to happiness. Submission. A voluntary act of giving yourself to another for the sake of the other. In friendship, at work, in a marriage, as a citizen and a church member. Such submission yields more good fruit precisely when what you’re doing would not be your instinct or first choice. Whoda thunk? Submission in love is actually at the heart of a God who has his very being in a relationship of self-giving as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And that’s what our long passage this morning is all about.



Let’s set a bit of context. It’s estimated that when Peter wrote this letter, there were only about 3000 Christians in all the Roman Empire. The empire had a population of some 60 million people. So the Christians were less than 5 1/1000th of a per cent of the population.¹ Even in a democracy, which it wasn’t, how much political voting power is that? How much economic influence did 3000 out of 60 million have? If I read this passage as the heir of a robust democracy, as an educated and affluent citizen, I might wonder, “Why didn’t Peter encourage the Christians to overthrow slavery?” If I forget that in those days life was cheap, women had no say, the concept of individual

personhood was barely recognized and workers' rights were nonexistent, I can totally miss the revolutionary nature of Peter's words. The gospel was a message that created a transformation of inner identity. Individuals discovered that they were cherished, a people of God's own possession and heirs of everlasting life. This inner realization empowered believers to choose to do freely for God what they had done before only under compulsion. The Holy Spirit within them gave them an electric energy. They had little to no external power over their life situation. But now they had inner power to do everything in the service of the God who loved them and saved them.



Peter wrote to caution those who gotten so energized. Remember in the first *Star Wars* movie when Luke Skywalker shoots down his first imperial Starfighter. "I got 'em, I got 'em" he shouts. And Han Solo deadpans back, "Great kid, don't get cocky." Peter wrote to people who

realized for the first time how they were chosen, beloved, free and destined for eternity. Great kids, but don't get cocky. Don't pop off about the emperor, respect him, even though his name is Nero. Don't say to your masters, "You're not the boss of me. Because Jesus is!" You are a free people. You are also bondservants of God. Live out your inner freedom from sin and condemnation by rendering good service to others.

Peter reminds them that this holds true even when they were mistreated. Even when they got accused of things they didn't do. After all, Nero blamed the burning of Rome on the tiny handful of Christians. Even when you suffer for doing the right thing. Then Peter says a line I have conveniently overlooked many times. It's stunning. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." For to this you have been called! Yes, only Jesus suffered in a way that he bore the sins of the world. You don't atone for sin in your suffering. Jesus did that. But his suffering included giving us the very pattern for life in the world. He gave his life away. He served others in love. He endured suffering without seeking revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to his Father, who will work out all things in justice in time. To this you have been called! This is the pattern. Free in Christ of sin and shame, belonging to Jesus above all others, you are now free to go back to the world that hates God and offer your life in love, submission, and patience in suffering. This is how the gospel will spread and the world will change.

At this point Peter draws on the beautiful, haunting words of Isaiah 53. The prophet foretold of the servant of God who would come to give his life on behalf of all. Let's read a portion:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Now listen to how Peter echoes Isaiah 53 and applies it to us:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Here we have a great mystery. It's been called the Wonderful Exchange. The miraculous commerce. A Crazy Swap. Jesus takes what is ours. He takes up our humanity in the incarnation. He takes our sins upon himself as he is condemned to the cross. He takes our broken, forsaken condition into himself. He lets it kill him. Then, rising, he returns to us forgiveness. He creates for us peace with God. He gives us freedom from the dominion of sin. We reject him and he gathers us back to his Father. He goes to the far country of forsakenness in order to bring us back to the sheepfold of his love.

Imagine if Jesus had said, "Wait! I don't deserve this! I'm not going to take this junk off of them. I'm the Son of God. I don't submit to anyone. They're not worth the pain. They'll never appreciate what I do, so I'm done with them." We would be lost. Nor would we love a God who stayed so removed from us.

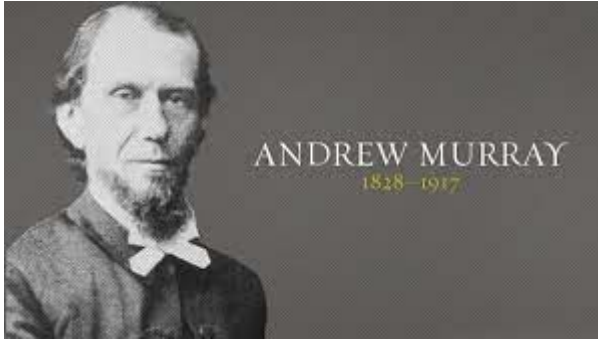
But Jesus submitted to the cross. Because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been offering themselves to one another in utter surrender and love since all eternity. We in our fallen state think of surrender only in terms of dominance. We

think of submission only in terms of being servile and suffocated. But complete self-giving is at the very heart of love, the very heart of God. Only when our sin nature is fully and finally removed will we understand this. But this fact means that in union with Christ, we will be giving ourselves freely and fully to the triune God and to one another for all eternity. From such joyful submission, creativity, imagination and flourishing will ever overflow.

Before we were made, the Father, Son and Spirit offered themselves to one another in the plan of our redemption. The Father surrendered his beloved Son in whom he has ever been so pleased in order to send him to us. The Son left his Father's side to take up our humanity and offer himself, as a man, back to his Father in a perfect obedience that climaxed on the cross. The Spirit, the Spirit of Holiness, offered himself to dwell within our stained and soiled hearts in order to join us back to the Father and the Son. The ever-giving members of the Trinity gave themselves to each other as they each gave themselves to us for our salvation.

That's a smidgen of what it means to understand Peter's words, "For to this you have been called, for Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." The way of the cross is the way of life. It's revolutionary. Counter intuitive. And utterly life changing, indeed world changing. This works itself out in our relationships. "You can't take from me what I've freely given you." So we give ourselves first to God, then we give ourselves to God by the way we love, serve, submit and even endure others.

Yes, of course, there are some caveats. Others may try to force us to deny Christ or disobey his Word. There is a place for disobedience. But we need to be very sure we've truly been asked to compromise God's Word and not just our preferences. Of course, alcoholism and substance abuse warp all the rules of normal behaving. Sometimes love demands that we not submit to enabling. The same is true for persistent emotional, sexual or physical abuse. Get out, and get help to get out. And in the advice to wives and husbands, it's crucial to enact the part addressed to us. Husbands, don't tell the wives what they're supposed to do. Wives don't tell your husbands their part. Each work on your part, for you are coheirs of eternal life! You will be equal in glory. That's enough to occupy each for a lifetime. So though there are a few caveats, mostly, I'm having to learn to give over my life freely to Christ by freely serving others. And if you want to experience that in your marriage, sign up for the Created for Connection weekend. It truly opens your hearts to each other.



I want to leave you this morning with the words of the great Andrew Murray, a true master of the spiritual life and one of the church's greatest theologians. Murray knew his own share of troubles. Once he had to keep all night vigil at his home when angry parishioners threatened to throw burning rags through his

windows—so angry were they about the stands he took in the pulpit. Then, at age 51, at the height of his career, he lost his voice completely for many months. He feared he might never preach again. Murray writes:

Learn today the secret of never suffering loss in the soul by the sufferings of life—yea, rather, of always making them your greatest gain. *Link them to God and to Jesus.* It is God who sends them. He sent them to Jesus and perfected Him through them. He sends them to thee in the same love, and will make them thy highest gain. Receive every inward and outward trouble, every disappointment, pain, uneasiness, temptation, darkness, desolation, with both thy hands, as a true opportunity and blessed occasion of dying to self, and entering into a fuller fellowship with thy self-denying, suffering Saviour.

Every trial comes from God as a call to come away from the world to Him, to trust Him, to believe in His love. Let but this truth be accepted, in every trial, small or great: first of all and at once recognize God's hand in it. Say at once: My Father has allowed this to come; I welcome it from Him; my first care is to glorify Him in it; He will make it a blessing. We may be sure of this; let us by faith rejoice in it. The salvation God has provided for us, the blessed life in the new and living way into the Holiest, through Jesus Christ, has such power that it can enable us amid every trial to be more than conqueror through Him that loved us. Give yourself up absolutely and entirely to God in Christ Jesus, as into the hands of infinite love; firmly believing this great and infallible truth, that God has no will towards you, but that of infinite love, and infinite desire to make you partaker of His divine nature; and that it is as absolutely impossible for the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to refuse all that good, and life, and salvation which you want, as it is for you to take it by your own power. ²

So dear ones, live as those who are free. Live as servants of God. Endure suffering by entrusting yourself to the God who judges justly. Remember that to this you

have been called, because Christ suffered for us, leaving us a pattern of love to follow.

¹ Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 67.

² Andrew Murray, *The Holiest of All*, Whitaker House, 1996, pp.487-8.