

We are going to be reading from 1st Peter 3:8-22. We have been reading through this letter we call 1st Peter for the last few weeks. I am going to skip the first 7 verses from chapter 3 and return to them next week. These first 7 verses are Peter's guidance on marriage and I did not want to focus on these verses this weekend during a holiday weekend.

We have been learning while we have been reading this letter that it is written to Christians in several churches throughout Asia Minor who are facing some sort of persecution. The persecution seems to be from people who knew them before they became Christian and they are picking on them for being Christian and for being different.

The text we are about to read is going to include a direct quote from the first Scripture we read today in worship from Psalm 34. Also, some of what we are about to read includes some quotes that go back to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Peter in this letter quotes a lot of Old Testament Scripture.

There is also something else that is interesting about today's Scripture. Whenever we use the Apostle's Creed in worship we utter the phrase, "Jesus descended into hell." The ecumenical version that we use says, "he descended to the dead." That phrase which was placed in the Apostle's Creed comes from today's reading.

We will read in verses 19 and 20 Peter saying that Christ made proclamation to the spirits in prison who in former times did not obey. The writers of the Apostle's Creed took this Scripture and interpreted it to mean that Jesus descended to the dead after his death. I do want to explore in another sermon about hell and a new way of understanding hell but that is for a later day.

Read I Peter 3:8-22

Have you ever been picked on? Ever been picked on in school or maybe in some way as an adult? It is no fun when you are the object of ridicule. I remember going to a camp when I was about 14 years old. It was Dairy Camp. Yes, there is such a thing as Dairy Camp. Bob Clinton knows what I am talking about.

I went to Dairy Camp and I felt different than the other kids that were there. Even though I grew up on a farm I grew up just outside of Columbia. As a result, I was involved in sports and stuff in Columbia and did not get involved with kids from some of the counties in the state with heavy dairy populations. So the other kids knew each other pretty well but I was the outsider.

Whenever someone is the outsider it is very easy to target them for ridicule or persecution. For children, it is the kid that acts differently, looks different, comes from a different place. Children have this ability to group together and identify the kid that they think is different and they direct their ridicule and insults that direction.

I wish I could say we outgrow it as adults but we know that we do not. We group together as adults and identify the one who is the outsider for whatever reason. Maybe we identify the outsider as the person who is different in some way. Maybe they are smarter than we are. Maybe they are more talented than we are. Maybe their family has more money than our family or maybe their family has less money than our family.

Or maybe the person we identify is just an easy target for some obscure reason that we just make up. We talk about them behind their back and we make up stories about them. It can be fun to be the one who is ridiculing another. It is not so much fun when you are the one who is being ridiculed. As painful as it may be, I invite you to recall the feelings you felt during those times when you were picked on by another.

Peter addresses the people who are being picked on. And in this Scripture which we have just read he has something very simple to say to anyone who is being picked on. "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called, that you might inherit a blessing."

When we get picked on we may want to retaliate. We may want to claim an eye for an eye. We may want to return abuse for abuse. If someone says something mean about us we may want to return the favor by saying something mean about them in return. Either to them or we may want to say something about them behind their back.

But Peter cautions against this. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse. If we repay evil for evil we are not reflecting the presence of God but instead the presence and victory of evil.

When we are picked on and ridiculed for whatever reason we retaliate because we become scared. We become scared and begin to question our identity. We don't like to be labeled the outsider and we begin to trust the opinions of others over the opinion of God.

But God does not ridicule. God does not push people to the outside. As Peter testifies in his letter, Christians welcome and Christians offer blessings. But we retaliate because we become scared that we are not loved and accepted by God.

There is a story about a little rabbit that lived near a tall palm tree. One day a coconut fell from the palm tree and landed right behind the rabbit. The coconut hit the ground with a loud thud.

The noise surprised and frightened the little bunny so much that he took off running. He was so scared that he never looked back to see what had created the noise.

An antelope saw him running and asked, "Rabbit, why are you running so fast?" Rabbit shouted, "Thud is coming!"

Antelope didn't know who or what Thud was, but also didn't want to find out. She started running, too. Just then, Rabbit and Antelope scampered past Warthog. He called out to them, "Why are you running?" "Thud is coming!" yelled Antelope. "Run for your life!" added Rabbit.

Warthog started running as fast as his short little legs could gallop. Before long they all passed a panda. Panda starting jogging with Warthog and asked, "Why are all the animals running?" Warthog snorted, "Thud is coming!" Panda joined the exodus.

Before long, all the animals were stampeding out of the forest as they wailed about the terrible Thud chasing after them. Finally the herd of alarmed animals came toward a lion. Feeling somewhat safe with Lion and needing to catch their breath, they stopped. Lion asked, "Why are you running?"

As if given a cue, they roared in unison, "Because Thud is coming!"

Lion asked, "And who is Thud?"

Panda looked at Warthog. Warthog looked at Antelope. And Antelope looked at Rabbit. Rabbit finally spoke, "I don't know for sure. I didn't see him. I only heard him!"

Lion asked "Well, then where does Thud live?" Rabbit answered, "Back by the coconut grove."

Then Lion started walking toward the coconut grove. The rest of the animals crept a safe distance behind -- but not too far lest they lose their protection. When they made it to the palm trees, Lion told the rest of the animals to watch and listen.

A moment later, a coconut fell from a tall palm tree. They watched it fall, and heard the end result -- a loud thud as it hit the ground.

Lion very smartly said, "There is your terrible Thud. You have been scared of a coconut."

When we are ridiculed and picked on it is like the thud in our ear. The thud that says we are not good enough. The thud that says we are different. The thud that says we are strange. The thud that says you are not as good. The thud that says you are unworthy for some reason.

But that thud that we are making so big in our lives is really just a coconut. It is nothing to fear. Those voices trying to tear us down are nothing to fear. We do not have to retaliate when we are ridiculed because God's voice in our ear is much louder.

And God's voice says you are special in God's eyes. You do not have to repay evil with evil. Instead, you can share a blessing. AMEN.

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-Given: May 25, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)