

Faith Mennonite Church
July 2, 2017
Dennis Edwards

Original Sins and Founding Sins

1 Peter 1:1-9, 2:11-17

Christians in the West have long enjoyed a certain social hegemony. It was popular, for example, to hear people refer to the USA as a “Christian nation.” That understanding of our country impacted our laws as well as our social conventions. I’m old enough to recall how rare it was to shop for just about anything on a Sunday because so-called “blue laws” restricted certain transactions, and the culture assumed Sunday as a Sabbath day. Judging from the last presidential election, it seems that some Christians are trying to recapture those days.

Christian influence in society was not only evident on the personal level, through such means as confrontational forms of evangelism, that influence was also realized through legislation. During part of my nearly eighteen years of ministry in Washington, DC, I regularly passed by or visited 100 Maryland Avenue, NE, the address of The Methodist Building, “the only non-government building on Capitol Hill.”¹ The Methodist Church bought the property, which is along the same street as the Supreme Court building, across from the US Capitol, in order to lobby for the prohibition of alcohol.

But in our pluralistic world, Christians debate our role in society. We question if our strategy should still include trying to influence society from the centers of power. It may be that we can take a cue from our forebears as well as our fellow believers in the non-Western world. Their contexts require Christians to be agents of good, not from a position of relative privilege, but rather from the margins of society.

In wresting with the role of religion in the public sphere, Miroslav Volf astutely addresses the context in which early Christians tried to impact the world:

For those familiar with the early history of the Christian church—and for careful observers of young and vibrant Christian communities in the non-Western world—there is something odd about the present sense of crisis in the West. The early Christian communities were not major social players at all! They were not even among the cheering or booing spectators. Slandered, discriminated against, and even persecuted minorities, they were at most a bit of a thorn in society’s flesh. Yet, notwithstanding their marginality, early Christian communities celebrated hope in God and proclaimed joyfully the resurrected Lord as they endeavored to walk in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah.²

Volf’s description of the early Christians is apropos of Peter’s readers. And I would add that it describes the African American Christian experience as well. We can learn from the perspective of marginalized people, like African Americans.

My experience has been that when white Christians acknowledge the unique contributions of African American Christians, the focus is often on preaching styles and soulful music. But preaching and singing are only part of the legacy of African American Christian faith, which is a faith forged by the fires of suffering. The New Testament letter called 1 Peter is written to Christians on the margins whose faith was also tested through “fiery trials.” Reading the epistle with an eye toward the African American experience can inform all Christians, especially at a time when Christianity is trying to discern its place in the culture.

There are several topics in 1 Peter that have special resonance with the African American experience, but I will touch on three:

¹ “History of the United Methodist Building,” <http://umc-gbcs.org/about-us/the-united-methodist-building> (accessed October 3, 2014).

² Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 78.

- (1) People Without a Homeland; i.e., the notion of being exiles of the Diaspora;
- (2) People who persevere with faith through suffering
- (3) People who witness under pressure

People Without a Homeland (1 Pet 1:1-2)

Peter opens his letter with reference to God’s Elect, exiles of the Diaspora. It may be that some of Peter’s readers were literally aliens in Asia Minor, possibly due to forced colonization. Peter’s readers, like emigrants throughout time, are socially disconnected from the dominant culture. In 1 Peter the Christian believers are alienated from a hostile society whose values are at odds with the teachings of Jesus.

Diaspora is not a strange notion to African Americans. Several years ago, when I used to subscribe to *Christianity Today*, I was annoyed by the ads for Christians to find their family crest. You could submit your last name and find out your family crest. The ad bothered me on a few levels. I understand that those who provided such a service knew that there would be a market among evangelicals for such a thing, to connect them to their European roots. But of course it was frustrating for me. I have this last name of “Edwards,” which I am sure is an English name, but how we got that name, I will likely never know. I cannot accurately trace my roots to any country in Africa. It will have to suffice to name an entire continent: “African American.” We are a people dispersed from the homeland and our history in the United States is not at all glamorous.

Immigrants—even in our time, as well as we who are the offspring of slaves—know the alienation that stems from a lack of familiarity with a new setting as well as from xenophobia on the part of the host culture. I am continually amazed at the endurance of my forebears, many of whom became Christians despite the evils of slavery as well as American Christianity’s ambiguous attitude toward slavery. Additionally, I am motivated and encouraged when I recall that our Lord Jesus was a voice from the margins and he shows that such a place can be one of honor. Because Jesus himself experienced life on the margins, it is fair to say that African American Christians may be in a unique position to model the way of Jesus.

The way of Jesus includes suffering, and this is my second point:

People Who Persevere Through Suffering (1 Pet 1:3-9).

Now, I know that I said that we African American Christians have more to offer than preaching and singing, but I do want to acknowledge one of our unique musical contributions. Slaves, who were brought from Africa to what would become the United States of America, were thrust into an environment heavily influenced by Christianity. Negro spirituals were birthed as slaves came to connect their story to the biblical story. The spirituals were fundamentally work songs that provided some measure of relief from backbreaking labor; they also served to help build a measure of community. The spirituals helped the slaves to affirm that they were not defined by their work; their identity was rooted in a spiritual reality that transcended their present circumstances.

There are many Negro Spirituals that illustrate the dynamic tension American slaves felt, but I will offer one example:

I want Jesus to walk with me
 I want Jesus to walk with me
 All along my pilgrim journey
 I want Jesus to walk with me

In my trial, Lord, walk with me
 In my trials, Lord, walk with me
 When the shades of life are falling
 Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me

Presently, with so many cases of violent altercations between police and Black people making the news, I wonder how long we have to keep demonstrating to the world how we are able to persevere through suffering.

African Americans give a unique glimpse into some of 1 Peter's ideas that illustrate the way of Jesus. My third point is that African American Christians demonstrate that upright behavior, particularly while suffering, witnesses powerfully for Christ.

People Who Witness Under Pressure (1 Pet 2:11-17)

Peter's admonition to his community in 2:11-17 includes the idea that upright behavior—particularly when under pressure—will communicate a positive message to onlookers (vv. 12 and 15), including silencing “the ignorant talk of foolish people.” The Civil Rights Movement in America illustrates Peter's point and may serve as a more contemporary example of how God's people witness to the world even when suffering.

One of the things that made the Civil Rights Movement effective was the abuse taken by innocent protestors who did not retaliate. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. propagated the notion of non-violent protest. And although there were some who disagreed with his approach, many look back on history and note that his philosophy, which was at the heart of the movement, drove the changes that inched their way through the United States of America.

Rep. John Lewis, in his memoir, *Walking with the Wind*, describes how the protest in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965, in which he participated, was especially impactful in catching the attention of the broader society. Lewis writes,

ABC Television cut into its Sunday night movie...with a special bulletin. News anchor Frank Reynolds came on-screen to tell viewers of a brutal clash that afternoon between state troopers and black protest marchers in Selma, Alabama. They then showed fifteen minutes of footage of the attack...The American public had already seen so much of this sort of thing, countless images of beatings and dogs and cursing and hoses. But something about that day in Selma touched a nerve deeper than anything that had come before...People just couldn't believe this was happening, not in America. Women and children being attacked by armed men on horseback—it was impossible to believe. But it happened. And the response from across the nation to what would go down in history as Bloody Sunday was immediate.³

If we took our time through this short NT letter, we would find many more points of resonance. But I will end on a personal note. Not long ago I went back to Washington, DC to attend the funeral of my great aunt, Flossie Johnson, a member of her Baptist Church for over 65 years. The eulogist was a retired judge who is also a lay preacher. He was 68 years old at the time and my great aunt was his mother's best friend. In fact, my great aunt was there when he came home as a newborn from the hospital. Judge Williams told stories about my great aunt's life in rural South Carolina. He told us about a woman born years before the Great Depression. She picked cotton as a child. She did domestic work nearly all of her life. Josie (my grandmother), Josie's only child, Loetta (my mother), and Flossie, Josie's baby sister, all worked as domestics for white people. In 1946, Aunt Flossie met a man on a streetcar in DC, fell in love, and stayed married to Clifton Johnson for 65 years until he died in 2011. My mother and grandmother eventually moved to New York, where my mother eventually met and married my father.

I can only imagine the mess these women had to face—much that I'll never really know or understand: the verbal abuse they took, the segregation that they faced, the humiliation of having to clean up other people's mess, and the thankless task of cooking other people's meals and caring for other people's children. Then on top of that, to have to cook, clean, and care for their own families! What a burden these women carried for years upon years!

³ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 344-45.

But Aunt Flossie had a rare gift of joy. She lived through mess and craziness, but always had a spot at the table for anyone. She was not only an amazing cook—something everyone talked about—she also had a gift for making people feel at home. At the funeral, several neighbors came forward to give tribute. Aunt Flossie had been there for them in times of need. That was awesome to hear! She lived a life of love and everyone there affirmed it. Despite the racist, sexist, patriarchal world in which she had to maneuver, because of her faith in Jesus, she chose to love. The preacher made it clear that Flossie Johnson lived the Golden Rule: doing unto others, as she would have them do to her. And the preacher challenged us all to go and do likewise.

My Aunt Flossie—and many people like her—are examples of people on the margins who show the way of Jesus despite suffering and alienation. They are not only people to be celebrated, but people who can teach us. Are we willing to learn from those on the margins? Consider today that lessons of faith don't always come from the top down. Thank you.