### “He Did Not Threaten” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 30, 2023

**1 Peter 2:19–23**

19For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. 21For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.22 “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” 23When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

**John 10:1–11**

1 “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd.”

Are you seeking to live the abundant life, to learn from Jesus and to receive what he has to give? Then you’ve come to the right place.

Let us start with First Peter. This letter has a fair amount of material about Christ, but this is the only place where he goes into Christ’s actual behavior. This part of the letter is not just lifting up Christ, but is spelling out how he behaved. Peter says that, when Jesus suffered, he did not lash out, he did not threaten or call people names, he did not pray for retaliation or revenge, and he uttered no deceit. He entrusted himself humbly to the Father, who judges justly. He extended mercy even to those who were hard-hearted and were not going to accept that mercy. But Jesus’ mercy had an effect on *some* people. Some were not *so* hardened, like the centurion who confessed that surely, this man was a son of God (Mark 15:39). Even Pilate’s wife was deeply impressed by him, and told Pilate not to have anything to do with prosecuting him (Matt 27:19).

Peter is exhorting us to show mercy, like Jesus. He says “you should follow in his steps” (2:21). So his merciful and non-retaliatory behavior is recommended for us, as well.

Non-retaliation had positive results in the story of Joseph. Joseph was resented by his eleven brothers, and they sold him into captivity. Years later, Joseph was able to rise in Egyptian society, even to the status of a state minister who distributed food to the populations of Egypt and some surrounding territories. Joseph’s brothers went down to Egypt to get food, but they did not recognize that the minister who would sell them food was their long-lost brother (Gen 42:6–8), although he recognized them. Joseph was harsh with them at first, and demanded that they return to Canaan and fetch the one brother who had not come to Egypt, Joseph’s full brother, Benjamin. When Benjamin was brought, Joseph had to retreat to a back room to cry. Then he composed himself and came and played a trick on them to make it look like the brothers had stolen from him. But finally he could control himself no longer and he made himself known to them, through tears. Joseph said it was God’s doing that he was sent to Egypt, so that he could save his brothers and their families (45:1–2, 5–8). He gave them land and he had them send for Jacob, their aging father. He and his brothers fell upon each other’s necks and wept (42:14–15). It is a moving story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph at first planned retaliation, but could not go through with it. He was able to become reunited with the large family, and to see and embrace his father again. Retaliation appears as a real option, but Joseph chooses reconciliation instead. The story illustrates how reconciliation is so much better than retaliation.

We have a different lesson in the passage from the Gospel of John. Jesus there lays out an extended analogy, explaining that he is the shepherd, that is, the guardian and protector, of the believers, who are like a flock of sheep. He says some people who came before him were thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not follow them. I am guessing he is referring to the self-appointed messiah-figures who sprang up in Judaea in preceding decades. For instance, Judas the Galilean led a revolt against the Romans, in resistance to the census that Quirinius conducted, around the year 6. Judas’s revolt was suppressed. Jesus considers this Judas a stranger, whom his sheep did not follow, for they did not know Judas’ voice. Jesus says his sheep know *his* voice, and they respond to it. He is the gate, and through him they travel and find pasture. He guarantees abundant life for them, because he is the good shepherd.

The analogy seems fairly straightforward. We who are followers of Jesus know to follow his leading and not that of any false messiahs. Jesus is the one way; he is the gate through whom we travel in our quest for good pasture. And he can assure us of abundant living, which he wants for all his sheep, all his disciples. What could abundant living be? Presumably lots of social interaction including joy and laughter. It would mean development in all areas of life: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Intellectual abundance would have to include ongoing education and unending learning. Emotional abundance would have to entail many loving relationships and shared activities. Spiritual abundance would mean increasing appreciation of truth and beauty in a wide range of experiences, along with ever-increasing awareness of others’ growing spiritual awareness.

Jesus is the gateway to this pasture of abundant living. If you keep your sense of taste, your affection for the shepherd’s voice, you will enter into this pasture. All of your experience will feel right; it will have the warm feeling that his voice produces in you. All of your experience will be tinged with the love of Jesus.

Heaven will be permeated with his spiritual quality, even his style. It is his realm, after all. All of this is obvious to the people and angels in heaven. It is not so obvious on earth. There *are* many false messiahs and bad leaders down here. Just recently we learned of a church cult under the control of Paul Mackenzie in Kenya. Followers are convinced that Mackenzie is getting direct messages from God, telling people to reject western culture and to starve themselves so as to escape this life and be with Jesus. Authorities have begun to open up graves on church property, and have found a total of 103 people who have starved to death, but 311 more people are missing.

Spiritual abuse by spiritual leaders is shockingly common, not always taking a suicidal form but often involving abuse of rank and file believers by authority figures of various kinds. This Kenyan group is a Protestant one. Of course, we know of the widespread abuse of children by Roman Catholic clergy. We have to have standards of justice and fairness that take seriously the welfare of all, and that would prompt us to speak up if we see the signs of abuse. The Muslim community in America and Canada has formed an organization called FACE, Facing Abuse in Community Environments, to investigate, expose, and halt instances of spiritual or sexual abuse by imams and other religious teachers.

None of us can be naïve any more about the reality of abusive behavior by clergy. Humans are fallible, and we cannot treat anybody as being beyond the possibility of corruption or misbehavior. Not all of the abusers make messianic claims, but all of them seem to exploit the aura of holiness that believers tend to put upon their leaders. We must be critical thinkers and observers, wise as serpents, knowing that there are wolves out there (Matt 10:16).

A number of organizations and individuals lead services to help people recover from having been captured by controlling cult groups. One group goes by hashtag “IGotOut.” People come to them from many different cults, and tell their stories. They let the survivors know they are not alone, that others understand the stripping of identity that goes on in dictatorial cults, and the feelings of shame and fear that survivors carry with them when they *do* get out. Gerette Buglion, the founder, speaks of herself being in a state resembling sleep for 18 years, and then finally snapping out of it and leaving. She speaks of recovering her creativity and authenticity.

Jesus is a reliable leader, who seeks to empower his disciples and to protect them from all wolves, both the ones who pretend to be their friends and ones who don’t. Grow closer to Jesus so that you may know his voice, know his manner and his ethics. He is the gateway to abundant living, to a broad and interesting life where a standard of values rules. Recognize what Jesus is like, how he uplifts believers, saying “take heart” (Matt 9:2, 22) and “do not fear” (Luke 8:50; 12:4), and often asking “what do you think?” (Matt 18:12; 21:28; 22:42). He encourages us and engages us, gets us to participate in the process of learning about, and partaking in, the Spirit. He doesn’t want brainless disciples, nor ones who are easily duped. He wants ones who can live abundantly. He doesn’t want to shut us down or shut us up, but to open us up and direct us upward.

Many people have had their lives turned around after ending up in prison. One of those was Ira Hatch, an embezzler. An elder in a church he once attended, Glenn Bradwell, decided he needed to start visiting Hatch in prison. Hatch was touched, and decided to turn his life over to Jesus. Now Hatch and Bradwell talk about faith and about God every time Bradwell visits. Hatch only talks to his wife by phone. He doesn’t want her to see the depressing environment of prison. Hatch reads spiritual books and is getting healthier while he serves his time. He, too, is a child of God, and is tasting something of the abundant life even while in confinement.

How much more can *we* partake of abundant living? Have you freed yourself from resentment, fear, and envy, and turned toward love, friendship, and study? There lies the path of freedom and abundance. Let the Son shine in.