

## “Model Behavior”

Acts 2:42-47, I Peter 2:18-25, John 10:1-10  
Easter 4, April 13, 2008, Lynn Japinga, Hope Church

Religious institutions have been kind of embarrassing this week. The religious group in Texas where girls younger than sixteen are being married off to older men. That's not exactly a mainstream group. But the pope is visiting New York this week, and I read that when he conducts Mass there won't be any women or girls assisting with the ceremony or the distribution of the elements. And when the new RCA magazine arrived this week, I was irritated that we can't just get one good Church Herald.

But you've all heard people complain about the church ... it's full of hypocrites, it's always asking for money, it's boring and irrelevant. It excludes people. And even if Hope Church is pretty close to perfect ... most of us have had some negative experiences with a church. We know the flaws.

So this passage from Acts sounds too good to be true. 3000 people were added to the church, and it continued growing. How did they get along so well? How could they spend so much time studying without arguing over theology? How could they worship so often without fighting about the hymns? How did they share their financial resources? In those early days the church seemed to be destined for success. Soon the whole world would be Christian, and everybody would get along.

But it didn't quite work out that way. By the time I Peter was written several decades later, it was clear that the church had not won over the whole world. In fact, the world was fairly hostile toward the church. They refused to worship the emperor so they appeared disloyal to the government. They believed in foolish ideas, like Jesus dying on the cross so they were not intellectually respectable. When they spoke of eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus they sounded like cannibals.

And yet people still became Christian because they found dignity and encouragement and meaning in the Christian faith. Slaves and poor people and women found Christianity especially appealing, and this only made the faith look more ridiculous to the rich and brilliant and powerful.

But the slaves who became Christian were in a real bind. Most of them had masters who were not Christian. How dare they adopt a religion their masters did not? How dare they talk about freedom in Christ? They were being disloyal and dangerous.

Slaves certainly did not have the freedom to engage in the kind of Christian community described in Acts. They could not go to the temple every day to study and learn. They could not spend time with other Christians over shared meals. They could not sell their possessions because they had no possession! The demands of their masters ruled their lives.

So did that mean their Christian life was inadequate? Should they rebel against their oppressive masters and demand their freedom? Should they burn the dinner? Drop the good china? But that was hardly realistic. They were slaves, in an oppressive situation, and they were powerless to change it.

So the author of this letter, like Paul before him, advised slaves to accept their roles. They might be harassed because of their faith, but they should patiently accept whatever the masters did to them. If they suffered unjustly, well, Jesus had suffered unjustly too. He was their model and they should follow in his steps.

Slavery was a given in Roman society. It was not a *good* given. It was not consistent with the Christian faith. But Christians were outsiders and deeply unpopular. They had no power to challenge the evils of slavery to matter how articulate their letters or sermons.

But in the last 2000 years some readers of this text have decided that if these writers seemed to accept slavery then God also affirmed and endorsed it. In the United States before the Civil War, many Christians justified slavery using passages like this one. Slaves, obey your masters! And in the midst of segregation and discrimination in the 1950s, African Americans were told that they had no right to fight for civil rights because they should simply accept abuse. And texts like this have been used to tell women to stay in abusive marriages. Jesus suffered, after all, and so can they.

So this text does not have a great reputation.

The author was writing to a very specific situation. The slaves wondered if they were being mistreated because their faith was weak. If God really loved them, shouldn't God have set them free?

Peter assured them that suffering was not a sign of failure or weak faith. Jesus also suffered unjustly. The slaves have been called and healed and forgiven. They have been returned to the shepherd. No beatings, no abuse, no ridicule could take the love and grace of God away from them.

So how does this text serve as a model for our behavior? Should we passively live with oppression because that is our only option? But it isn't. We live in a very different environment. We live in a nation that calls itself Christian. We are not powerless. And yet we have often been quite passive. We have been willing to tell oppressed people that they should continue to suffer. But that is not how this text should be speaking to us. This text should not be taken as a justification for racism, or slavery, or domestic violence. We should be doing all that we can to fight those evils.

It's true that there are some people in the world, and in our own community, who are ridiculed or oppressed for their Christian faith. And sometimes they don't have much

power to change that. And it may be very affirming to hear that they can follow in the steps of Jesus. Their suffering is not a sign of their weakness or their sinfulness. God has not promised (despite what some TV preachers say) that becoming a Christian will guarantee our success.

But for most of us, the challenge is to be a Christian in a culture which claims to be Christian, but doesn't necessarily live out Christian values. And how does the church help us to do that? The specifics of the Acts passage may not be so relevant. We might not be able to spend our days in study and worship. We have jobs, after all!

But it is the basic values of the early church that ought to be providing a model for our behavior. And emphasis on teaching and learning, and worship and Eucharist. Community. Prayer. Sharing. Pretty basic stuff. You don't see a lot of gimmicks or brilliant strategies for church growth. You don't see an attempt to manipulate emotions. Just steady, holistic practices of the Christian faith that engage the mind, the heart, the soul, the body.

Not every text is a reliable model for behavior. But Jesus is. He gathers the straying sheep into the fold. He calls us into the church. He invites us to share in the teaching and the table and the worship and the prayer and the sharing. And he calls us to resist the powers of evil as much as we are able. When we cannot resist, he calls us to live faithfully in the midst of suffering. And he invites us to this table, a sign of grace. This is the good news of Easter. Thanks be to God. Amen.