

An Example
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Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1 Peter 2:19-25

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. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Although I didn't watch when the show was first released, I was a regular watcher of reruns of *Lost in Space*. You might remember the show about the Robinsons, a space colony family who escaped Earth's overpopulation in 1997, struggling to survive after a series of mishaps.¹ Perhaps most iconic from the show was the ship's robot, and protector, whose tagline was "Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!" To this day there are times when that phrase comes to mind, and reading 1 Peter is certainly one of those occasions. We read lines like "But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval" and

¹ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058824/?ref_=nv_sr_4

“because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.” Danger! Danger! Pastor Joy Douglas Strome tries to clarify, saying, “Making the distinction between suffering for a just cause and suffering for an unjust cause, the text teases a qualified sanction for suffering under certain circumstances. Nowhere does it suggest that suffering is a legitimate condition for those who are abused, coerced, or oppressed. Nowhere does it suggest a stoic tolerance for violence against anyone.”² The problem remains, for me, that the line still seems blurry because those who made Christ suffer were, frankly, jerks and his suffering was because of the awfulness of other human beings. Sure, we know it was for the greater purpose of our salvation but, on this side of earthly mortality, it can be hard to know to what end, if any, our suffering at the awfulness of others might serve. Professor Joel B. Green tries to explain “Christ’s nonretaliation in the face of suffering is a model for his followers.”³

As someone who, as a young woman, found herself in a mentally and emotionally abusive relationship, which lasted for a year-and-a-half, this reading and the attempts to clarify it still leave my experience murky. In the midst of it, I believed I was doing good by treating this person with kindness in response to his cruelty, instead of stooping to his level. Somehow I eventually understood that I could be in a relationship without being treated cruelly and yet that understanding didn’t erase, doesn’t erase, my easy confusion on when exactly we are supposed to follow Christ’s suffering example. I really hope God isn’t giving me a gold star because I let someone tell me I was stupid, because I was afraid to be seen talking to other guys, because I had to earn the right to be spoken to some days, because I could never be thoughtful enough. Specifically, to quote the reading, being aware of God, when am I supposed to endure pain while suffering unjustly? The way I was treated in that relationship was surely unjust, but wasn’t the entire series of events which led Christ to the cross also unjust? I suspect you might comprehend why “Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!” came to my mind. I don’t think I’m going to get my head around how to discern just and unjust suffering and which experiences lead me to follow in the example of Christ - at least I

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 436.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

haven't gotten my head around it yet. The closest thing I have to what I could call understanding centers around the nonretaliatory approach. It's not that we must stay in situations which cause us to endure suffering, especially ongoing, habitual suffering, but, should we find ourselves in the midst of suffering brought about by another, that we do not retaliate in response.

Suffering because of injustice is going to happen and we have the choice to retaliate or not. What I know is that nonretaliation is NOT the same as acceptance or resignation. And I guess the question of defense must come up for me, or at least standing up for oneself. So maybe I really don't have understanding. I know the whole "turn the other cheek" but I can't help but think that if I would step in for someone else in suffering, why wouldn't I stand up for myself? How does unjust suffering fit into life abundant? I'm afraid I must leave you with questions about this reading, discomfort with it, as much as I would like to give you tidy answers or a satisfying resolution. The only thing I can tell you with certainty in my bones is that suffering abuse and oppression, racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, that unjust suffering is not what God asks of us. No God of love, nor life abundant, could suggest that we'd get the reward of approval for that kind of suffering.

I suppose that leaves us this morning with the reading from Acts, the stories of the early church being good church together and for one another. Theirs is an example I can understand, an example whose parallels I can find in our daily lives. What did Jesus tell the rich man? See all your possessions and give the money to the poor.⁴ What did the early church do? "[I]hey would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."⁵ The early church "spent much time together in the temple." They gave thanks for the food they had; they had the goodwill of all the people, presumably because of their treatment of others, and all so that others would see their good works and give glory to God. This all makes sense. These are examples we can follow. These are things Jesus specifically commanded us.

⁴ Matthew 19:21.

⁵ Matthew 18:20.

Professor Gary Neal Hansen makes clear how these behaviors of the early church are still applicable. He writes, “A mark of authenticity and health in a church is what it does with the writings of those early Christian leaders...Authenticity and health in a congregation are surely seen in the way they eat together, but this is more than fellowship. This ‘breaking of bread’ seems to allude to the Lord’s Supper, faith and community fed by the sacrament...A mark of authenticity and vitality in a congregation is the quality of peoples’ relationships and their efforts to include others in those relationships...A mark of authenticity and vitality in a congregation will be their involvement in prayer. More than a part of worship, prayer is for each of us the opportunity for communion with God.”⁶ **This** we can do; **this** I can endorse; **this** I can say with confidence befits the God I know. So may we be the body of Christ in this way.

Let us pray: Lord, as we continue to discern your word for us, give us strength to do what we know is right, we pray. Amen.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 426/8.