

**“Do the Right Thing”**  
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 5/10/26

This week I had the pleasure of traveling to Pittsburgh to see my mom win the Pennsylvania Bar Association’s Anne X. Alpern award. The award honors a woman whose work and mentorship have had a significant impact on women in the legal profession. It was a joy to watch my mom receive this well-deserved award – and, come to think of it, not a bad celebration of Mother’s Day, either.

At the awards luncheon on Thursday, the featured speaker was the recent past president of Rotary International, Dr. Stephanie Urchick. As many of you know, Rotary is an international service organization which brings people together in local clubs to do good both where they live and in connection with others all around the world. In her speech, Dr. Urchick shared about her own travels for Rotary projects, and also about the work of Rotarians living in other countries. One story she shared was about the 14 Rotary clubs in Russia.

When Vladimir Putin began his attacks on Ukraine in 2022, Russian Rotarians were some of the first people to arrive with humanitarian aid, crossing the border to bring supplies and support. But it was not long before those same Rotarians started receiving threats from their government. Better stop helping the Ukrainians if you want to keep your job. Better stop helping the Ukrainians if you want to know where all of your family members are. In the wake of these threats, the 14 Russian Rotary clubs made the difficult decision to move themselves to inactive status – at least for the time being. They remain hopeful that they can get back to their service work soon.

When I heard that story on Thursday, I immediately thought of today’s passage from First Peter, this clear call to do what is right even when it makes you unpopular. The letter we know as First Peter was probably written not by Jesus’s disciple Simon Peter, but by someone carrying on his ministry later in the first century. This teacher writes from Rome to Christians in Asia Minor, to encourage them in the face of difficulty. Many of them have lost their social standing due to their conversion. Instead of being included in their Greco-Roman communities, they are being verbally abused, they are being socially ostracized due to their faith, a faith that now makes them religious minorities. Some of them have even been arrested by local authorities for following Jesus. And so they are trying to figure out how to live – how to live with this constant hum of negative attention. They are trying to make sense of their suffering.

The author recognizes that when you are being maligned, it’s tempting to repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse. But this is not the way of Christ, he says. Do not return evil for evil or abuse for abuse, because the way of Christ is to repay evil with blessing. The way of Christ is to have a tender heart and a humble mind, to respond to skepticism or criticism with gentleness and respect. The way of Christ is to do good: to do good in all things, at all times. You may suffer for doing what is good – in a hostile society, suffering may be unavoidable. But remember, Christ also suffered for doing good, and his suffering was in fact what brought you to God. No, you may not be able to avoid suffering, but it is better to suffer for doing good than to suffer for doing evil.

That, by the way, was a common saying in the first century: “it is better to suffer for doing good than to suffer for doing evil.” So common, in fact, that it appears in the writings of Plato. And it’s basically inarguable, isn’t it? Of course it’s better to suffer for doing good than to suffer for doing evil. Who wants to suffer for doing the *wrong* thing? Much better to do what’s right, to stick to your principles, to do good in the world and suffer from a lack of understanding or lack of compassion; much better to suffer from someone else’s malicious response to your goodness than to suffer for your own sins.

“It is better to suffer for doing good than to suffer for doing evil” – the author of First Peter takes this common phrase and gives it a theological twist. Do good, he says – follow Christ’s call to love your neighbor even if doing so leads you to suffer. In the short term, you can hope that your goodness will put your opponents to shame – that your righteousness will expose their maliciousness to the world. You can hope that your upstanding character will make your opponents look bad, even silly. Go on, kill them with kindness.

And if that doesn’t work, First Peter says – if that doesn’t work, in the long term, you can trust that Christ’s suffering on earth made a place for you with God. The evil people around you – God will judge them. And God will also see your righteousness. The God who raised Jesus from the dead and seated him above all earthly and heavenly powers – your all-powerful God will see your righteousness and give you the blessing of eternal life. You may suffer now, but in the end, you will receive the victory.

First Peter’s twist on the common wisdom of his time can be helpful for us as we approach Christian life in our time. What are we to do as followers of Jesus Christ? We are to do good. We are to do good even when it makes us unpopular; we are to do good even when it leads us to suffer. As followers of Jesus Christ our call is to love our neighbors. Sometimes we will be called to love our neighbors in ways that make us outsiders and outcasts, breaking with the majority opinion of our culture. Sometimes we will be called to love our neighbors in ways that leave us sideways of the powers that be, like those Russian Rotarians crossing their government by crossing the border to care for Ukrainians, literally their neighbors. But we love our neighbors anyway. We do good with courage anyway, trusting that if we suffer for it, our suffering is seen by God and redeemed by God.

First Peter’s framework for making sense of our suffering can be helpful for us as 21st century Christians. But it’s also important to recognize that the original recipients of First Peter’s letter thought that Jesus was coming back, like, tomorrow. If Jesus is coming back any day now to make his final eschatological judgment on the whole world, then it makes sense to just hold on. Even if you’re suffering for your faith, just hold on a little longer. Jesus will be here to put an end to all this

very soon. Put your head down, keep doing what you're doing, accept what's coming to you – gentleness and respect, gentleness and respect. Those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.

But of course, here we are, 20 centuries later, still waiting. Personally I wish Jesus would get his stuff together and get down here – I'm not sure how we're going to get out of this mess without him. But in our time, in our theology: we *long* for Jesus to return, we do – but we also know that the wait could be a long one. And that means we need to be careful how we think about suffering. All too often in Christian history, passages like this one from First Peter have been used to justify suffering, to argue that suffering of all kinds is good for us as humans, that somehow suffering is a gift from God to refine us. That therefore we should accept our suffering with gratitude. And if we want to interpret our personal suffering in this way, if we want to work with God to make meaning of our suffering in this way, I think we absolutely can.

But we need to be careful when we assign meaning to other people's suffering. We need to take care not to look at other people's suffering and say: their suffering is good for them, their suffering is God's gift to them. We need to take care especially when suffering comes not from personal tragedy but from systemic injustice. When suffering is the result of sexism, when suffering is the result of racism, when suffering is the result of unequal access to healthcare or education or opportunity – then our call is not to make meaning of suffering, to tell those who are suffering to accept it with gentleness for the benefit of their souls. No, then our call is to understand the root causes of that suffering and take action to address them. When suffering is the result of injustice, then our call is to love our neighbors actively, to do good by overturning systems that oppress. Then our call is to seek peace, the true and lasting peace of God's *shalom*, wholeness and wellbeing for all.

One such person who saw suffering and responded not with mild-mannered acceptance but with a clarion call to *shalom* was Julia Ward Howe. Howe was an abolitionist and an advocate for women's suffrage, who wrote the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." In 1870, she also wrote what she called "An Appeal to Womanhood Throughout the World," which later became known as her Mothers' Day Proclamation. Having witnessed the horrors of the American Civil War in her homeland, followed closely by the devastation of the Franco-Prussian War in Europe, she called on women to band together, to take political and social action for peace.

"Arise, then, Christian women of this day!"<sup>1</sup> Howe wrote. "Arise, all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

"From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: Disarm, Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice. Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence vindicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of council.

"Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take council with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God. In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women, without limit of nationality, may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient, and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace."

After writing her proclamation, Howe called for June 2nd to be regularly celebrated as a "Mothers' Day of Peace." Though her idea never quite caught on, 30-odd years later, Anna Jarvis established Mother's Day as a liturgical observance in the United States, inspired at least in part by her mother's work with Julia Ward Howe. So if what you want this Mother's Day is not some flowers or a card but a safer and more equitable world – you're right on the money. Do good, love your neighbor, seek peace, pursue justice: you may not be popular, but you will be blessed.