

4th Sunday of Easter

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

From this pulpit and through this church, we most often emphasize the positive aspects of the Christian gospel. This is as it should be. The Gospel is primarily a positive message. This is good news about who God is and what he has done. The New Testament is primarily a positive document. The four Gospels report mainly what Jesus did and said. The Acts of the Apostles reports how the apostles continued the work which their Lord had begun. Jesus was and is a positive personality. His impact on the world has come primarily from his love, and no force on earth is more positive than that. So, if you and I were to preach or practice the Christian gospel, our focus must remain on the positive side of life.

But our second reading reminds us that this is not the total story. When Peter wrote this letter, he was probably well advanced in years. In the passage that we read, he was remembering those days when he shared and observed the earthly ministry of Christ. That he would indulge in such reminiscence is not in the least surprising. We all like to reminisce, and the older we get, the more precious the practice becomes. So, we can certainly understand why Peter, as an old man, would sit down to write some of his memories of Jesus. But what he remembers about the Lord may be a bit surprising.

Suppose, for a moment, that you had been one of those original disciples, walking and working with Jesus during his public ministry.

Then years later, you sit down to remember and write about the Lord. What do you think you would have remembered first? Surely, it would have been something positive Jesus said or did. But such was not the case with Peter. His first memory was something negative, something Jesus did not do. Peter wrote about Jesus: **“When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten.”**

Is not that interesting? Here is the man who walked and worked with Jesus for the better part of three years, and the first thing he remembers about is something he did not do. We could call it “surprising,” but if we keep in mind the kind of man Peter was, it really isn’t surprising at all. Think back, for example, to the night Jesus was arrested. Peter was the man who drew his sword and slashed at one of the guards, cutting off his ear. Then later that same evening, he exploded at some bystanders who suggested that he was one of the friends of Jesus.

That was the kind of temperament Peter had. It was not in his nature to turn the other cheek. He must have listened in disbelief when Jesus told his disciples to do that. Then he must watch in wide-eyed amazement as Jesus actually does it. For him, the most unforgettable fact of Calvary was what Jesus did not do. **“When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten.”**

In this age of positive thinking, you and I need to remember that there is also a negative side to great character. What we do not, says a great deal about what we are.

The way Jesus reacted to hostility revealed a depth of character that none of us will ever fully achieve, but we certainly admire it and strive toward it. He did not answer anger with anger or violence with violence. He was wise enough to know that such methods are ineffective, and he was strong enough not to be drawn into them.

When I think about it in the life of our Lord, I wonder a little about some of us. How many times have we said or heard it said, **“Sure, I get upset easily, but I also get over it easily. I just blow up, speak my mind, and that’s the end of it?”** I am not sure we should brag about that. You can tell a good bit about a person's size by what it takes to upset him. One foot on the edge can tip over a canoe, but you jump up and down on the edge of an ocean liner, and it will not even lean. What we do not, says a great deal about what we are.

This truth has been manifested by various people in various ways. No doubt, you have seen it with some of your friends. It may have been a man who experienced financial reversal. He lost his job or maybe even his business. The bills kept coming, and there was no money to pay them. He looked for a job and found none. You feared he might go to pieces, but he did not. Or a young person was struck with a serious disease. The doctor diagnosed it as inoperable and irreversible. As the weeks went by, you expected her to become bitter and cynical, but she did not.

Such human dramas are played out every day, and they remind us that great character, although primarily positive, also has a negative side. What we do not say says a great deal about what we are.

Consider also that what **“we do not”** play a significant role in what we ultimately do. Peter knew that Calvary was Calvary, not simply because of what Jesus did there, but also because of what he did not. Had he gone to the cross with angry threats and insults, then his crucifixion would have been no different from hundreds of others, and it would long since have been forgotten.

The things **“we do not”** play a major role in what we ultimately do. The young person who graduates from college is not simply the one who enrolls; he is also the one who does not drop out. An athletic team that wins is almost always a team that does not quit. The man who succeeds in business is, without exception, the man who does not give up. The person who makes a practical success of the Christian life is the one who begins and then faithfully follows the basic disciplines of Christian living. But he or she is also the person who does not turn back.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The point of this sermon is that great character is within reach of us all. None of us can be all that Jesus was, nor do all that he did. But at least we can follow this much of his example: **“When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten.”** The least and the most limited among us can build and leave that kind of legacy.

We can so live that someday our friends will say: **“When he was insulted, he did not respond with insults. When he was discouraged, he did not quit. When he was down, he did not give up.”** Great character cannot be built on negatives alone, but neither can it be built without a few. The things **“we do not”** ultimately play a major role in who we are and what we accomplish. **Amen.**