

Sermon 041308 Community  
Scripture 1Peter 2: 19-25  
Sermon Title Resident Aliens

Our text for this morning is from the first letter of Peter. This document appears in the lectionary readings in the period we are now in which is called Eastertide. That is the period, also called the ‘fifty great days’ is the time of observance and celebration of Easter, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Easter is not one day; it is a season. Peter’s first letter is read because it is considered a guide to living life as Christian, a follower of the risen Christ. Scholars who have studied this letter over the centuries pretty much all agree that the letter originated as a sermon on the occasion of a baptism. It is a baptismal sermon, expanded into a letter. In the early churches, Easter was the one time of the year when people were baptized. It makes sense to read first Peter during Eastertide because the letter is thought to be a guidebook on how to be a follower of Jesus, which the newly baptized can use. Baptism should and does change things.

Now, for some people, Baptism changes pretty much everything. There are some sects that have the newly baptized give up their money and homes. They move in with others of the group and become cut off from their families and the rest of the world. They change the type of clothes they wear, the work they do, what they eat, how they talk, and even how they think. You’ve

heard of some of those sects that have ended in tragic circumstances. Although some of these separatist sects surely do more harm than good to the followers, it is by no means true of all of them.

On a trip to Pennsylvania, on one of my several visits to the Gettysburg National Battlefield, I had some of the best food in the world cooked by the Amish people in nearby Lancaster. Among the desserts was shoe fly pie. I wouldn't think of eating shoes or flies but I love shoe fly pie. Anyway, when the Amish people came in with the food, we knew immediately that they were different. They look different, dress differently, drive horse and buggy instead of cars, only marry their own, and pretty much keep separate from the outside society. They also seem very happy and content with their lives. The Amish, also known as the Pennsylvania Dutch, is a good separatist sect of Christianity, in my view, among many that are not so good.

Our Bible reading, First Peter advises against the idea of the baptized separating themselves from society. His advice is to do the opposite. First Peter says to the baptized in so many words, 'Now go back and live this way. Go back into the community, into the school, into your family. That is where you live out your Baptism.' That is the Word and that is the Word I believe in but it is, when you think about it, dangerous advice. It is in many ways a

lot more dangerous than the notion of separating yourselves from society.

How can we Baptize people and just send them back into the world, into the community, into their families, into the schools, into the workplace and expect them to keep their baptismal commitments? What is to prevent them from just getting absorbed again into the world and developing the same prejudices and values that the world holds? They dry off from their Baptism, and we just send them back into the world?

We somehow absorb worldly values, if you can call them that, even when they are not overtly taught to us. We get annoyed more often than we get sentimental. We get angry and hold grudges. Image has replaced identity, which replaced character in the worldly values. In worldly values it is okay to get scared, or resentful, or boisterous, or jealous. Worldly values draw battle lines between nations, races, and religions.

The culture is a powerful thing. People tend to want to fit in. One of the deepest instincts of the human heart is to get the approval of one's neighbors and friends. A way to do that is to absorb the interests and values of the people around you and make them your own. Success, recognition, and conformity are the bywords of the modern world. There is security in identifying with the majority. Is the cost of doing that the loss of the values that we

learn from Jesus Christ here at church? To be both a true Christian and a functioning member of society can be accomplished but it is not easy.

It is about being a ‘resident alien.’ That is, it is to be living in the world but to be of another world. Every Christian is a citizen of two worlds, the world of time and the world of eternity...the world of the world and the world of faith. As Christians, we are called to be people of conviction, not conformity; of moral nobility, not social respectability. We are called to live with different values and to hold higher loyalties. The baptized Christian is a stranger in a strange land. The church is an island of one culture surrounded by another culture and we are called to function in both.

This struggle between our beliefs and the values expressed in the world we live in is as old as Christianity. The 17<sup>th</sup> century preacher John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrims Progress*, was in our Congregational tradition. Bunyan had already served twelve years in prison when he was promised freedom if he would agree to stop preaching. Part of his response was, “I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, to suffer...rather than to violate my faith and principles.” We need Christians today who echo his words.

Down through history, churches have had worldly struggles that test the discipleship of members. In fact, church is a place where people can learn to live out Christian values with one another, but it has always been a struggle even in the house of God. An example down through church history is that some folks love church traditions and want to hold fast to them. Others find their spiritual life enriched when the signs of the times are present in worship. Is one right and the other wrong? No, I don't think so. Can the different views exist successfully together? Absolutely. Being a Christian has never meant just getting your own way. In fact, it means the opposite. It is about being one in the Spirit. The church has cherished roots and traditions that are 20 centuries old, yet has always managed to stay current and relevant because the church is about being one in the Spirit. It is about loving God and your neighbor. It is about forgiveness and reconciliation. It is about being 'other oriented.' Have you ever thought about the furniture you are sitting on? The pew, along with being an amusing sounding word, the pew is a uniquely Christian piece of furniture. It is designed and built so that church people are together. You are with other people. Here, you are not alone. (The barrier down the middle of the center pews is there for practical and structural reasons, not theological reasons, by the

way.) The church is the place to learn how to live, work, and be with others as one. The church is the place to start.

So can we, the people of the Word, be ‘resident aliens’ who *do not* separate ourselves from this world? Can we be people who live in this world and contribute to this world, but hold values and beliefs that are not of this world? Can we accept the challenge of first Peter? My answer is yes, but it does not happen without suffering. Peter says in our reading this morning, “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, it is commendable before God.”

To be a Christian, one must take up one’s own cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tragedy packed content. Remember, the person who carried that cross to Calvary, did not do it for himself, he did it for us. To be a Christian we must carry that cross until it leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to a more excellent way, the way of our Savior. That is what equips us for living authentic life in this world as a Christian.

We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of world values that say, “I am right and you are wrong and/or we are good and they are bad?” Or will we listen to a more distant drum and move toward its echoing sounds. Will we march to the music of the world, of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-feeding music of eternity? Will we, the baptized, be Christians just in name, or is being Christian truly

about who we are and whose we are? Listen for the music of  
eternity deep in the heart's core. AMEN