

1 Peter 1:17-23 3 Easter 5/08/11 Pastor Bill Uetricht

It's Mother's Day, and with such a day generally comes a lightness of spirit, an opportunity to reflect on the goodness of God to us that we experience in relationships, especially nurturing ones. Yet today I find myself reflecting on the very serious events of this past week. Who would have thought last Sunday that during this past week we would have received the historic news that the world's most wanted man, Osama Bin Laden, had been killed?

I suspect that not one person in this sanctuary or hardly any person in this community had a deep, personal grief reaction to the news that Osama Bin Laden had died. Let's face it. Our hearts burned with sadness and anger ten years ago when we discovered that through the leadership of Bin Laden suicide planes were orchestrated to crash into significant buildings in our country. This plan was carried out, and thousands of our own people died as the result of it. At that time we experienced vulnerability in a way that most of us had never before encountered. So to hear that Bin Laden is dead was for most people in this nation good news. I wondered a bit this past week about the way that we received that news. For many, Bin Laden's death was a reason for bravado, for triumphant celebration. We won; we conquered; we retaliated, many were saying. We had one more trophy to place on our shelves.

Now, I fully understand our reaction to this event. Overt evil had met us face-to-face. And we had done something about it. But I have to wonder, for those of us who are Christian, if indeed bravado is the right response to what we have just experienced. I have to wonder if indeed being Christian has something at all to say to how we relate to the world around us, a world that is full of hatred and evil. Does it have

something to say to the events that we corporately experience? Is there is a posture that we Christians assume as we face and deal with the culture of which we are a part?

Those are big questions that have been answered in a wide variety of ways throughout church history. The author of First Peter, the book from which our second reading comes, seems to be struggling with these very issues. How is it that Christians relate to the culture around them? What kind of posture do we assume in relationship to the culture and to its values?

First Peter was probably a letter written by a person who had an affinity for the Apostle Peter, and it probably was circulated among early Christians who were scattered throughout Asia Minor, what is modern day Turkey. These Christians lived in light of the overwhelming influence of the Roman Empire—an empire that was large and in charge, an empire that knew how to inflict pain on its people, particularly those who posed any threat to it. The author of First Peter tells his audience that lives in light of this dominant power that they are to live “in reverent fear during the time of [their] exile.”

The word “exile” grabbed and grabs my attention. It comes from a Greek word that literally means “outside of the house.” The Christians First Peter is addressing are said to be living “outside of the house.” Now initially, we can take that to mean that they are scattered people, that they are not living in the home base. But I have to wonder if more is not meant by the term. And I think the author’s words that make up much of the rest of the text indicate that he does mean more.

“You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or

blemish.” I get the sense from the author of First Peter that in the culture being addressed by him silver and gold seem to reign. Money seems to be what matters. And the audience of First Peter is being reminded that they live in a different world, that they operate out of a different value system. Their world, their value system focuses on a slain lamb, not on power or money, but on a lowly slain (killed) lamb. In other words, in the world of exile, something different than what the Romans operate out of is running the show.

So the author of First Peter in describing his audience as those living in exile is suggesting to them that they do not live with the same values with which the culture that surrounds them lives. They are outside of the house that the Romans have built. They are not to live comfortable with the values of the Romans, so comfortable that they have moved into the Romans’ house. No, they are to be distinct, “holy,” First Peter would say.

And what does that distinctness, that holiness look like? Well, first Peter says: “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.” What is to mark them, what is to represent their holiness is the deep love that they have for one another, love that is not just a show, not just something that is a matter of appearances, but love that flows from the depths of who they are and includes all that they are. Living in exile, living outside of the house that the Romans have built, means living in love. The Romans operate out of power and money. Christians are to live out of love.

I am very much intrigued by the word that Luke today uses to describe Christ, the surprising visitor who meets some unknown disciples on the road to Emmaus. When the raised Christ asks Cleopas

and his friend what they are talking about as they are heading toward Emmaus, Cleopas responds, "Are you the only **stranger** in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" The word for stranger can be translated "exile," "visitor." The Christ is said to be an exile, a visitor, somebody who is not one of us. Without a doubt, he is an exile to these disciples who are traveling to Emmaus; he is a stranger. They can't figure out who he is. They don't recognize them.

And also in many real ways, Jesus was a stranger, an exile in the world that he lived in. He represented an alternative world. He operated out of a different value system. He didn't move into the home that the Romans built. He lived outside of that house. He was an exile, an alien, if you will.

Peter in Acts says that we put this alien, this exile to death. He was crucified because he represented a totally different world. We tried to extinguish this different world. But, we are told, God pulled a fast one on us. He raised Jesus from death. God put his mark of approval on Jesus and the strange world that he represented. And now, we who follow him, we who have, as the author of First Peter says, been born anew through our baptism into his death and resurrection, are connected to **his** world, his way of being in the world. We become strangers to a world that operates simply on the basis of fear, power, and money. We live, therefore, not out of triumphant bravado, not as if the world is ours to capture and conquer, but rather ours to serve and love.

Bin Laden is dead. For most of us, this was good news. But the true good news for us is centered on a lamb that was slain. The true good news is centered on a God who would not let death be the final

word for that lamb, the God who put his stamp of approval on the way that Jesus was in the world. The true good news is to be discovered in the new world brought in by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Bin Laden's death is not a reason for celebrating. Honestly, his death was probably tragic necessity. It is a tragic end to a tragic story.

You and I live in a world that is full of evil, full of hatred. Tragedy is what we experience in and around us constantly. In the midst of the tragedy you and I confront a God who doesn't add to the tragedy but who in the midst of it reveals a deep love, a serving and compassionate heart. We see that love and heart in Jesus. And those of us who follow him, those of us who are exiled from this world, those of us who are taken to a new world through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we live not out of a call for retaliation, not out of a boasting that builds a trophy case, but out of love and compassion that truly can build a whole new world, a whole new world that moves us beyond the never-ending spiral of violence that so plagues our world.