

"Resident Aliens"
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
Lectionary Year A
May 8, 2011
Text: 1 Peter 1:17-23
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I want to direct your attention to our epistle lesson for this morning. In this passage of scripture from 1 Peter there is presented an interesting perspective on what it means to be both in the Church and in the world. In the first sentence of this passage (verse 17), the Greek word that is translated "exile" in our scripture reading is the word *paroikia*. Later in the epistle of 1 Peter the word appears in the form *paroikos*. Literally, this Greek word means "outside the house," as opposed to inside the house.

As referred to in 1 Peter, those persons who were *paroikos* were "outsiders," "foreigners," or "resident aliens" with respect to the society and culture in which they were living. This New Testament letter was addressed to those persons who, though residing with or among the native citizens of the country, nevertheless were persons with limited political, economic, legal, and social rights.

The people to whom the letter of 1 Peter was written were, in other words, marginalized in society. They were not "in" with the "in crowd," and they certainly were not treated equally. The deprivation of these people was only worsened by their affiliation with Christianity, which was at that time a minority religion that was little understood and even highly suspected by the majority culture. Strange people with a

strange set of beliefs, these outsiders, these Christians, these resident aliens.

The tensions created by the pressure to conform to the different values of the surrounding culture threatened to undermine the Christian community's faith, hope, self-confidence, harmony, and cohesion. So what was the writer of 1 Peter's advice to these people "outside the house," these "resident aliens"? We see it in the first verse of our passage of scripture for this morning, that is, "live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." Later in this letter, the writer goes on to use the phrase *oikos tou theou*, "the household of God," in order to encourage the members of the Church. As Christians, they may have been "outside the house," with respect to the world around them, but when they were at church, they were in "the household of God."

The prominent and deliberate use of this house and household terminology in 1 Peter was designed to elevate the self-esteem of the Church, to affirm its Christian distinctiveness, and to provide a rationale for continued social estrangement. Such usage was part of the author's intent to counter the Church's conflict with the society around it that was insisting on conformity and assimilation and threatening to destroy the Church's unique sense of identity. Instead of being just like the society around it, *the Church was being called by the writer of 1 Peter to be an alternative society.*

I know what you are saying. So what? So what if the members of the early Church in Asia Minor were asked to see themselves as resident aliens, being, in the words of Jesus, "in the world, but not of the world"? What has that got to do with us? We aren't resident aliens, are we?

The Church is not some sort of colony planted in a strange land, is it?

Well, in their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Stanley Hauerwas and Wil Wilimon suggest that it may still be helpful for us in the Church today to see ourselves as the writer of 1 Peter suggested a long time ago. Here is what they say in the preface to the book:

A colony is a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and lifestyle of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced.

We believe that the designations of the Church as a colony and Christians as resident aliens are not too strong for the modern American church—indeed, we believe it is the nature of the Church, at any time and in any situation, to be a colony. Perhaps it sounds a bit overly dramatic to describe the actual churches you know as colonies in the middle of an alien culture. But we believe that things have changed for the church residing in America and that faithfulness to Christ demands that *we* either change or else go the way of all compromised forms of the Christian faith.

The Church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another. In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens. . . .

The Church is to be a colony. But what does it really mean for us to be such a colony with respect to the world? How are we as members of *this* church supposed to function in the world? What does it mean for *us* to be resident aliens? It means that we are not simply aliens. We are *resident* aliens. Yes, we are not to be "of the world," but we *are*

to be "in the world." We are not to be completely cut-off, detached, removed from the world. We are to be engaged with the world. The Church is not to be a place where we hide from the world. The community of faith is not to be the "great escape" from the problems of daily living, as attractive as that may seem sometimes.

Here is where cult groups miss the boat, in my opinion. They understand quite well that being a Christian means to be an alien with respect to the world, but that's all they understand. They live a half-truth. They forget that we are supposed to be *resident* aliens, that is to say, an active part of the world and not separated from it in monastery or community or a compound.

Rather, the Church is to be the place where we equip ourselves to deal with the world. We are to learn the story here, the only place we can learn the story of who God is and who we are, and then we are to share that story with the world around us. We are not simply aliens, we are *resident* aliens, and we have an obligation to be responsible residents.

We vote, we pay taxes, we purchase goods and services, we volunteer, we serve in leadership positions, we make a contribution, we support what we believe in and protest what we don't. In all ways and at all levels, we are involved socially.

But being resident aliens not only means that we are not simply aliens, it also means that we are not simply residents. Even though we function in the world as residents, just like everyone else, we are not residents alone. We are resident *aliens*. As the Apostle Paul puts it in Philippians 3:20, *our citizenship is in heaven*. We do not belong strictly and solely to this world. Our supreme loyalty is to God and God's

kingdom.

We are not simply residents, in that we don't buy into everything that other residents do. We don't do things just because everyone else is doing them. We are to be different. Our values are to be different. Our lifestyle is to be different. The way we treat others is to be different. The way we live is to reflect God's way of doing things, which is not always or automatically the world's way.

A few years ago, Jesse Jackson spoke at SMU, and I was intrigued at the time by some of the things he had to say about life in our society. I don't always agree with him on issues, but I did on this occasion. According to a *Dallas Morning News* story on his talk, Jackson suggested that the remedy to our social ills in this country lies in practicing compassion toward one another individually and as public policy. Jackson cited the Ten Commandments as an example. According to him "God sent Moses back down the mountain with a 10-point urban policy plan. As guides for modern living, the Commandments are cost-efficient as well as morally right."

He's got a point. Society needs better ethics, and who is supposed to have the ethical understanding that can help the world? The Church is supposed to. But we have to live out those ethics, those "alien" ethics.

We have to demonstrate the kind of compassion toward each other that Jackson was talking about if we are to hope to influence the world around us.

Being resident aliens means that with respect to the world, we are both residents and aliens. Let me see if I can use this illustration to explain what it means to be a resident alien. I am a United Methodist

minister. Do you know what church I belong to? In which local congregation is my membership? This is a trick question, because the answer is that I don't belong to any local church. As an ordained elder, I am a member of the North Texas Annual Conference. I serve Schreiber Memorial United Methodist Church, but my membership is in the Conference.

What that means for me is that my ultimate loyalty belongs to the Conference. I heard that someone in our congregation who didn't like something I said or did made the comment about me recently, "He needs to remember that he works for us." No I don't; that's not United Methodist polity. I work *in* this church, but I work *for* the bishop. This means that I am free to, and at times am called to, confront you and be critical of you. I can and should call your values into question when they are not biblical. It means that I can, when it is appropriate to do so, speak the truth to you in love so that your faith can deepen and mature. It means that I can challenge you to be the church God desires you to be. It also means that I am not required to do everything you ask me to do. I am to do what the Conference expects me to say and do, even if it is not popular or pleasing to the congregation I serve.

In much the same way, you are to function as a Christian in the world. Because you are a resident alien, with your citizenship in heaven, you are free to confront and be critical of the world around you. You are free not to do everything that the world asks you to do. You can say no. You are free to challenge the world to be a better place. Your ultimate allegiance is to God and God alone.

Because we are to be both residents and aliens, *it should not be*

easy to be a Christian. If it is easy for us, we are not doing it right. Let me repeat that. If it is easy to be a Christian, we are not doing it right. Being a Christian should be a joyful experience and one that is extremely fulfilling, but it should not be easy, precisely because it is to be so counter-cultural. Because it is not easy, we need each other for support and encouragement. As the writers of the book I quoted earlier suggest,

to be resident but alien is a formula for loneliness that few of us can sustain. Indeed, it is almost impossible to minister alone because our loneliness can too quickly turn into self-righteousness and self-hate. Christians can survive only by supporting one another through the countless small acts through which we tell one another we are not alone, that God is with us. Friendship is not, therefore, accidental to the Christian life.

My vision for this church has been that it will realize that it is a colony, a special and unique place where there is real community. Real community—where everyone is treated equally, where everyone is accepted and affirmed, where everyone has the opportunity to share her or his gifts, where everyone is made to feel a part. Make no mistake about it. Real community like this is hard to find in the world.

I'll be honest with you. Schreiber has made some strides over the last five years to achieve real community, but we have plenty of work to do yet. I ask you to work together to continue to make this church what every church is called and commissioned by God to be: a colony of care and concern in a world that, when it really gets down to it, often doesn't give a damn.