

1 Pe 1:17-25
 8 May 2011
 3rd Sunday of Easter

“Living in Exile” (part 2)

Last week was part 1 of my sermon. I spoke about the charge that our pastors gave to Banu and me at our ordination service. Banu’s pastor charged her to fail, that is, to take risks that might result in failure. My pastor charged me to tell my story of being in a “far country”—the “far country” being my experiences with brain cancer.

In the first verse of our letter, Peter calls his audience “exiles.” For them, being exiles, being refugees, is something they can relate to. For us, it’s a little more difficult. It’s more about being in exile from our true selves. Part 1 of my sermon ended with some questions. Have you ever been—or are you now—in a “far country”? Can you see yourself as an exile or as a refugee? What does it mean for you to be resurrection people?

I really want us to think about that. If we can’t **imagine** or feel the **need** to live another way, then it will be pretty difficult to **live** any other way! If we have no longing to live more deeply, more fully, then in a sense, we’re already dead. We need to be resurrected!

Peter picks up the theme of exile in verse 17. “If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.” Just like in verse 1, the Greek word (παροικια, *paroikia*) can also mean “sojourning” or “living in a strange land.”

There are Christians in this country who actually claim the identity of exile. It isn’t such a stretch for them to see themselves as living in a strange land. That’s “strange” as in “foreign,” but I suppose “strange” as in “weird,” would also apply! I imagine all of us could testify to times when we’ve felt like we’re living in a strange land!

When I speak of Christians who claim the identity of exile, I’m thinking especially of those who might be called neomonastics, the “new” monastics. From every tradition and denomination, these are Christians who really do put into practice the idea of “blessed be the tie that binds.” They don’t live in monasteries, but as communities of faith, they make a deliberate commitment to follow Christ. They do this as communities, not just as a collection of individuals.

They take Peter quite seriously when he says in verse 22, “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.” That last line in the Good News Bible says to “love one another earnestly with all your heart.” In the Revised English Bible, it’s “love one another wholeheartedly with all your strength.” The Greek word (εκτενωσ, *ektenōs*) means “intensely.”

Fine, Peter, that’s easier said than done! How do you propose that we bring this about?

Kyle Childress, who is a Baptist pastor in Nacogdoches, Texas, tells an interesting, and sobering, story.¹ In September 2005, a month after Hurricane Katrina

¹ www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/116016.pdf
 (“Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life”)

hit Louisiana and Mississippi, Hurricane Rita slammed into East Texas. There was plenty of destruction, but their church building avoided the worst of it. They were able to house some evacuees from Houston, as well as some of their own church members.

During the day, people would be cleaning up from the hurricane. At day's end, they gathered at the church, eating delicious meals—then playing games, having conversations, and getting ready for bed. It was, as Rev. Childress says, “a good time of sharing life in Christ” (p. 33).

He goes on, “after most of the people from Houston had left town, I went down to put gas in my car. By this time, the lines were short and I waited behind a man and his wife in their one-ton pickup with a dual-wheel rear-end. Guns were hanging prominently in the truck as they got out. She glared at everyone and kept the door open on the truck with the guns in easy reach, while he proceeded to fill up his two twenty-two-gallon tanks on the pickup and then fill up his many gas cans and two fifty-five-gallon drums in the back-end. I watched them, gave them a wide berth, and I felt a shiver. I was not only looking at American society in microcosm, I was also witnessing what the Church is up against. Here was an apocalyptic moment, when our society's pretense, politeness, and orderliness were blown aside. Clearly, this couple believed they were on their own; they did not need anyone or want anyone to interfere with their individual lives, and they were going to make sure they got what they wanted or needed, by any means, including the use of violence. Meanwhile, down the street was a church full of people who believed that the good life was found in sharing a common life in Jesus Christ” (34).

When Childress speaks of that “common life in Jesus Christ,” he isn't referring to something that happens by accident. He isn't talking about something that just comes up out of nowhere. He's talking about a rule of life. A rule of life is something that people agree together to follow.

He continues, “Since it is rare to see local congregations share such a common life, and most church members have no idea such a life exists, much less is desirable, it is imperative that we look around for other glimpses and models of what a common life might look like. One of those places is among the communities of the New Monasticism movement. As a local church pastor I am interested in what the new monastics might teach us” (34).

A rule of life isn't a set of beliefs; it isn't a confession or a creed. It's about how we behave in the world. Probably the best known rule of life is the Rule of Benedict. This goes back to the early sixth century. Saint Benedict is known as the father of western monasticism. He wrote his Rule to govern life within the monastery, but it has principles that are easily applied to those in every walk of life.

One good example of this is in chapter 53. Benedict says, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” That's the spiritual foundation for Christian hospitality that extends throughout the Rule, and for that matter, throughout life itself.

There isn't any one single way to arrange a rule of life. At the institutional level, our Presbyterian *Book of Order* serves as a rule of life, at least in how we govern ourselves. It's a way of helping us follow processes that are laid out. It's a way of making sure that we're all on the same page, so to speak!

Childress notes, “Whenever there is conflict or misunderstanding—and living in close proximity to others, there always is conflict—the rule is part of the conversation

among the members. Over time the rule is often clarified or modified...What is essential is that the rule is used in service to sharing their common life in Christ and not as a form of domination. Members of an intentional community come together as a joyful response to the call of Christ. The rule is a means to ordering that joy-filled life" (36).

This is an extremely important point. If we are to follow Peter's mandate to "love one another deeply from the heart," the way we go about it cannot be "a form of domination."

On Palm Sunday, I spoke about my brief experience with the church in Philadelphia that employed domineering, controlling practices. This was the group where, for example, their idea of a Bible study was basically an interrogation to see if you give the right answers. (I realize that doesn't sound very intimidating. They did worse stuff than that; it's just that that was when I decided I'd had enough!)

Something else from our Baptist brother: "Most modern church goers see the congregation as a gathering of individual Christian believers rather than a single body with various members. Individualism is so pervasive that it taints almost everything we say and do in the Church" (38).

Our American culture **especially** has taken individual freedom and just run with it. Understand, I'm glad I wasn't born in a culture in which the only thing that matters is the family or the clan. There are cultures in which the family is quite literally worshipped; the voice of the individual is ignored. But that's where Christ enters in. Christ should be seen apart from those cultural excesses: culture in which the individual is deified, and culture in which the individual is demolished.

To embrace a common life in Christ, the American church has to resist that "lone wolf" mentality that is so much a part of our culture. One last quote from Childress: "If our people are going to live the Christ-like life, then they had better do it as a body or else they will never make it. Lone individuals trying to live faithfully cannot stand against sin, death, the Powers, and the overwhelming pressure of society. Church members, as individuals, are easy pickings for the Powers of Death; they will separate us, isolate us, *dismember* us, pick us off one at a time, and grind us down into the dust" (39).

That is an awesome statement, and I couldn't agree more with it.

What are the "Powers of Death" he refers to? What are the forces that kill us inside and turn us against each other? What are the things that distress the Spirit of Christ, and bring suffering? These are some of the "Powers of Death."

Sometimes events happen, and we are compelled to say something about it, because it's right there in our faces. That happened this past week when we all heard that Osama bin Laden had been killed. Like almost everyone, I felt a real sense of relief when I heard the news.

I told the Bible study group on Wednesday that my preference would have been for him to be captured and put on trial before the entire world. Still, maybe it was necessary to kill him; I don't know. I have to say that I'm not terribly sorry that the man is dead.

But when I saw the images of people dancing in the street, having parties, I was saddened. On 9-11, the terrorists were doing the **exact same thing**. Imitating that kind of behavior is the very **least** Christian thing we could do. It is the most un-Christlike way to go. I would dare say that we could see the "Powers of Death" at work.

David Gushee, who at seminary was both my co-worker and teacher, has said, “As Christians, we believe that there can be no celebrating, no dancing in the streets, no joy, in relation to the death of Osama bin Laden. In obedience to Scripture, there can be no rejoicing when our enemies fall.”²

Admittedly, it’s a difficult thing to apply Jesus’ call to love our enemies when the enemy is a mass-murderer. It’s difficult to know what that would look like. Still, if we would be people who love Jesus, we need to learn to love what Jesus loves.

Verse 23 says, “You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.” The powers of death, the forces that have us living in exile (whether we realize it or not), can do nothing when faced with the living and enduring word of God.

Can we together say that this is not our homeland? We are still refugees, living in a strange land. Can we again commit ourselves to follow the one who leads us out of exile?

² www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-05/it-ok-cheer-osama-bin-ladens-death