

5th Sunday of Eastertide  
Sermon 5.3.26

**Acts 7:55-60**

But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

**1 Peter 2:2-10**

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” This honor, then, is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” and “A stone that makes them stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (357)

It was a matter of coincidence that I got an email from the Pilgrim Press on Friday, just as I was getting serious about writing this sermon. The Pilgrim Press is the publishing house of our denomination, the United Church of Christ. They’ve got a new book coming out, *Nice Is Not a Fruit of the Spirit*. Its writer is Julia Seymour, an ordained pastor in the Lutheran church. Subtitled *Living Faithfully in Complicated Times*, the assurance of its title, that “nice is not a fruit of the spirit,” is likely to recognize and to depart from the assumption that many brought up in the Mainline Protestant Church might have about what Christianity is, what it looks like in the world: it’s nice.

I regarded but momentarily the incoming email before deleting it. “I know,” was my thought. “No need to tell me. But someone should have told the writer of the Letters of

Peter.” These letters of Peter, these two letters of Peter: they’re nice. They counsel us Christians to be nice.

It’s one of only three places in the New Testament that the word “Christians” is used, and only here, in 1st Peter, is it used affirmatively rather than mockingly, and is it used by one of us rather than by someone aiming to “other” us, to ridicule us. See, with these letters we’re at a point in the life of the early church where things had begun to establish themselves, the Church had itself begun to settle in. The early fever of the transcendent God arrived in history, this sudden advent and astonishing presence and utter transformation and at last out-of-this-world promise about what would come next (*Christ* would come next and again, and then the real action would begin!); all this fury of imminent possibility had begun to clear the system and now was settling in a new normal.

And, truth be told, turns out, it wasn’t *that* different from the old normal.

I mean, it was and it wasn’t.

The lives of the people who’d joined up with the church were changed. They’d left behind old practices and traditions, and in some cases they’d had to leave behind homes and villages. Because of what they were no longer willing to do or what they no longer felt compelled *not* to do, many had to take total leave of the old, set out to make something new. The Jews who’d come to follow in the Jesus way were no longer as bound by the Law. Now, they could eat almost anything, pray in almost any place at any time, and live among people not like them. The pagans who’d come to follow in the Jesus way had to change their thinking about the value of human life and the imperial cult that demanded veneration but gave little respect. See, these individual lives: they changed quite a lot.

But the life of the world, the way of the world: this seemed not to have changed at all. Rome still ruled, a new Babylon come to replace the old. Life was still toilsome. You had to labor for food. You had to labor for new life. Death was rampant, and people were people, as likely to be gracious as exploitative, as likely to give way as to take advantage. Yes, the congregations of the early church practiced grace, pooling their resources, caring for the vulnerable, the strong acting with their power to make wellbeing for the weak. But the bigger the church got, the more likely these values would be violated, these norms would be broken. It’s really hard to scale up kindness so what had begun as matters of

appeal would become matters for enforcement, and the church wasn't formulated to be enforcing.

Likely because early on there was a prevailing notion that settling into the world—settling *back* into the world—wasn't something these “Christians” would ever have to do. The *parousia* was coming, the second coming of Christ: it would happen within history, it would happen with their lifetimes indeed to end history or to break history into two distinct realms. Truly, it would happen soon. These early “Christians” were living in the end times, which would make for a release from all this hardship, a liberation from all this injustice. The churches merely had to abide in the way of Christ until there was some new absolute abode wherein they might enter—and then there would be no more trying, no more teaching, not more guiding, no more correcting and puzzling and discerning and getting into a battle of wills. God's way would be the all in all, obvious and irresistible. Christ will have come.

But then he didn't.

And then he still didn't.

And people began to die before his coming.

A generation would die, and then another would.

And he still didn't come.

It's often cast as a matter of embarrassment that so much early formulating among so many of the earliest thinkers about Christ incarnate involved his imminent return. It's often cast as embarrassing to the early church that they'd thought so firmly that he would come again and soon and in a way unmistakable, victorious. How embarrassed they must have felt as time wore on and they weren't given liberation from time's hard cast. How wrong they were, and how embarrassing for them, to have supposed time itself had a shape and a purpose they could understand and even anticipate, and they themselves were caught up in it at a propitious moment in a propitious way. The Gospel of Luke even cast Jesus as a new Moses, making the whole world a new Egypt and history itself a state of enslavement. In this framing, the firmament could be felt as a totalizing Red Sea through which Jesus would lead his people from the imminent to the transcendent, and there in this new realm they would be free and would live lives of eternal abundance. Milk and honey, sustenance and sweetness.

Whoops.

Still here?

Awkward.

I once arrived at a barbecue on the day after a millennial cult had predicted would be the last day. The elect would be taken up, the rest would be left behind, and this barbecue went ahead. And when I arrived in the crowded back yard, one of the revellers saw me and claimed relief while laughing. "If you're here, then it didn't happen," he said.

"You think too highly of me," I said.

Because, fact is, I've long settled in. I don't wait with such presence of mind as those earliest Christians did and as some apparently still do. My task as a Christian as far as I see it isn't to sit on my suitcase at the end of my driveway but to live in the "already" and the "not yet," to live as if the reign of God were already here among us and I were already abiding in its absolute midst, while also recognizing that the ways of the world still go about their business, injustice yet reigning, suffering yet for so many winning the day. My task as a Christian is to work that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

But I also don't think the long-ago eager waiting of the earliest Christians is a matter of embarrassment. Rather, I imagine it involved real distress. They'd been jerked around quite a lot by cosmic things. Their lives of abiding toil and ordinary pleasures, this sixty years' worth of people in and around Galilee dealing with the normal press of life in the Roman world, in the ancient world, life among peasants and fishermen and with its humble hopes and gentle graces and painful grinds and political terrors, interrupted by this unimagined coming, God incarnate, the anointed one in their midst, though not a mighty warrior who would make things right and would make life better, but rather a peasant like them, yet one who'd end up crucified and dead, buried to be forgotten, but then raised to life forever and seen ascending to the throne of heaven: I don't blame them for failing to see it from an historical perspective, with the proportion of history baked into its formulating. I mean, he'd come, he'd gone, he'd come again, he'd gone again, so why would the assumption that he'd come yet again be anything but sound reasoning, pattern recognition and not a cause for embarrassment?

As you might know, I grew up on the coast of New Hampshire, near Strawberry Banke, a settlement dating back to 1623. In 1958, some people of Portsmouth went about

reclaiming the common of long ago Strawberry Banke, and the houses that huddled humbly near the shore on the land of the Abenaki. As a grade-school student in nearby North Hampton, I'd go to Strawberry Banke and was encouraged to imagine what life was like for these early settlers.

And it'd have been easy to see these huddled houses as a matter of embarrassment. They didn't know how big this continent was! Silly people, they failed to know that what would come to be called North America involved a lot of space so they could get to their McMansions with their great rooms and two-acre zoning ASAP. But no, small minded as they were, confined to their limited perspective about this "New World," they hunched together, small rooms, low ceilings, patches of land where (fingers crossed) their crop of turnips might yield food enough for next winter.

If they made it that long.

We judge the unknowing of people prior to us as if we aren't ourselves bound in our own perspective, which one day might prove embarrassing, and possibly even shameful. But, to paraphrase our savior, we know not what we do so we should at least do what we do with a tincture of humility.

But by the time the Letters of Peter came to be written, the fever of Christ having come to the world had begun to subside, the seizure of this event—this terrifying, promising *advent*—had begun to subside and a new normal had taken hold, and it was both very different from the old normal, and not that different at all. Like the Risen Christ himself, seen here and seen there, there was both continuity and transformation. Jesus Resurrected was both recognized by those who saw him, his long-time friends and his occasional followers, and not recognized by them. Just so, the world as visited by him was both as ever it had been and transformed, made plump with new promise and purpose, for those with eyes to see, for those who found themselves, as they're called in the 1st Letter of Peter, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called out of darkness into his marvelous light, indeed once not a people but now God's people.

The world, God's beloved and yet unfinished creation: pretty much the same, and also utterly transformed—and in any event a place where you should settle in and get comfortable, if not too comfortable.

See, it's unlikely that Peter wrote these two letters. Despite the fact they claim Peter as their author, it's unlikely this was actually the case. Peter, one of the original twelve, the one on whom Jesus claimed he would found his church, even changing his name from Simon to Peter, whose Greek root *petra* means rock: it's unlikely, so goes scholarly consensus, that *that* Peter is the Peter claimed as author of these two letters.

For starters, the language of these letters is high Greek, a fluency with which it's unlikely Peter would have had or would have come to have. What's more, these Letters don't seem concerned with what concerned actual Peter. Peter, the letters focus on forming a Christian identity for this still small but growing presence of people now scattered throughout Asia Minor (Greece, Turkey). See, whereas Peter the preacher was concerned with Jesus, crucified and raised, Peter the letters are concerned with what it means to live as Christians, what the Christian life is to *look* like.

And what it's to look like is nice.

It's in this letter that we learn that slaves are to be obedient to their masters. It's in this letter that we learn that wives are to submit to their husbands, if with the attendant admonishment that husbands should be considerate of their wives. It's in this letter we learn we're to suffer injustice with magnanimity and grace because it puts us in harmony with Christ having so suffered. When we endure cruelty that causes us pain without ever fighting back or even speaking up, we are as Christ was at his trial, never arguing his case, and as Christ was in carrying his own cross, and as Christ was in his submitting to the hammer and the nails. Like sheep led silently to the slaughter: so meekly we must also live.

And that's not gonna work for me.

No wonder I think I've never preached on this particular lection. Twenty-five years an every-Sunday-preacher and I don't think I've approached this lection.

It is a delicate thing, forming a group identity, which the writer of this letter finds himself in the position to have to do. Perhaps to his own surprise, he finds himself having to formulate an identity for this new group that seems now to have to settle in.

And there are easy ways to do this. There are easy ways to formulate a group identity. The easiest one of which is to establish all that "we" are not, to cast upon an outside enemy all that "we" are not and the hatred of whom, the resentment of whom, can take on real generative power.

It's best when this outside enemy has done something actual to us—not just a fabrication but an actual violation, something egregious, something outrageous, something like stoning to death one of our most treasured members, like Stephen, one of the original twelve, the one whom Jesus made special effort to appear to resurrected and to show him his wounds, just as Stephen demanded on the evening of the morning of Jesus' resurrection. "Unless I see the wounds of his hands, and touch the wounds of his hands and his side, I will not believe."

If the people whom "we" are not were to have done something as grievous as stoning Stephen, and then not just Stephen but lots of others of us—killed, imprisoned, hunted down, driven out of town—then we would have real fuel for forging an identity that also granted real purpose: to get even, to enlarge our numbers enough to exact revenge.

I wonder if the Letters of Peter, in their erring toward niceness, is but an urgent avoidance of forging an identity in this evermore evil way for if the church were to do that, they would not be the church.

There's a question out there these days about what U.S. America is. Our president aired it once again in his speech before King Charles, arguing then with the idea that America is "merely an idea," as if ideas aren't themselves grand and mysterious, the very thing that makes the human human—the having of ideas, the creating or receiving of ideas. Our president takes umbrage at this, probably at Stephen Miller's urging, the racist whispering in our president's ear. Trump corrected this, claiming that America is not an idea, or set of ideals, as stated in the Declaration of Independence and established in the Constitution to which all in government are to swear fealty, but is rather a people whose earliest members bore "in their souls the blood and noble spirit of the British...Their veins ran with Anglo-Saxon courage..." America, in sum, is a people who share a bloodline, which conveniently makes it impossible to join. You either are or you aren't. And if you aren't and you're pretending to be, then you're a criminal and "we" will round "you" up.

U.S. America took the idea of itself from Christianity, the idea that you can be an idea of gathered selves and have that in and of itself generate a new reality. The Church is a community of people gathered not by blood but by the blood of Christ. The Church is a community gathered not by the boundary marking all others out, those whom we exclude;

is rather characterized by expansive welcome, the center set, like the sun in a galaxy, and the outer boundary ever wide.

“They’ll know we are Christians by our love,” I sang at church camp, which you might have done as well. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” For the Letters of Peter this love looked nice, very nice. But it can take on other forms as well. The undying pursuit of justice, the resistant practicing of mercy, the resilient insistence upon the truth in spite of a world spun of lies, there are a lot of ways to live by love—at least as many as there are people in this room, though there is room also for many more.

Let us go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God.