

“We are sojourners in this world.”
1 Peter 2:11-12

A New Normal

The Stay-at-home order finally lifted last Saturday so I am recording this sermon in our beautiful sanctuary. Of course, the end of the stay at home order does not mean the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our bishop Devadhar has asked that suspension of in-person worship continue through May 31. So we will continue to do online-worship services throughout this month and carefully review whether we can safely restart in-person worship services in June.

Even if we can gather at the church, our time together at the church will be very different from what it used to be. We will have to follow Public health guidelines such as sitting 6 feet apart, wearing masks, and avoiding physical contact at the time of passing peace. There will be no coffee hour. This will be a new normal.

Many of us may feel that Covid-19 has suddenly changed the world we knew. We are living in the same world but we are living in a completely new world at the same time. The old ways of greeting, hanging out with friends, dining at restaurants and shopping are not safe and don't work any longer. The only shopping I used to like was grocery shopping but now I cannot even enjoy that anymore. The world we knew seems to suddenly have turned into a strange place in which invisible danger lurks everywhere. So we feel that we are standing in a strange wilderness.

Earth is not my home.

We don't like this situation but it also illuminates a forgotten truth for Christians. Earth is not our home! We have been so familiar with our lives in this world and made ourselves cozy in it. Right? And somehow, we have forgotten the fact that we are only 'resident aliens' in this world. Our permanent citizenship does not belong to this world but to the kingdom of God. We are God's people.

Let me share a poem written by Frank Rose.

Thank you, Frank for sharing your beautiful poem with us. God doesn't give me creativity or artistic talent. But God surely gives me many people with those gifts so I can use them!

As Frank says, Earth is not our home. No matter how much we have achieved in this world and how familiar we are with it, this world is not our permanent home. We will go back to our true home when our time in this world is up.

We Are Aliens to this world!

“We are sojourners in this world.” This is the central teaching of the First Epistle of Peter. Peter said, “Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul.” We are living in this world as aliens.

Have you ever lived in another country? I have been living in the United States as an immigrant for 12 years and I am still an alien. Being an alien is a strange experience. I am here but I don't really belong here.

As you may have noticed, I often use 'we' language rather than 'you' language when I preach. But there are some moments when I hesitate to use the words, 'we' or 'our.' For instance, I feel a bit awkward to say “pray for our nation” since I am not U.S. citizen. If I say,

“pray for your country and your national leaders,” it will create a kind of distance between you and me. Right? So I generally say, pray for this nation.

As a resident of the United States, I have to keep U.S. laws as well as Korean laws. Some things legal in the U.S. are illegal in South Korea. For example, Rhode Island has decriminalized Marijuana so people can buy and use it for medical and recreational purposes. But using pot is a criminal violation in South Korea so citizens of Korea, no matter where they currently live, should not use marijuana. By the way, don't worry about your pastor. I am not interested in pot.

Being aliens mean standing in an in-between space. This place of being in-between is sometimes, painful but it has also broadened my perspective. What I would like to say is that we as people of God have dual status in this world. We are living in this world but we are under the rule of God.

Living as Aliens

Of course, the rule of God and that of nations do not always synch with one another. The First Epistle of Peter was addressed to Gentile Christians living in the regions of Asia Minor. Until they became Christians, Gentile Christians followed the rules of the society. They were familiar with their world of many gods. Just as we have church street, they might have 'temples street' and they walked on that street every day.

They were familiar with the Roman caste system. In ancient Roman society, the basic human relationship was determined by which social classes they belonged to. Members of different classes even dressed differently. Women were treated more like possessions of men and slaves were treated like cattle. They were used to this kind of social order and relationship and found their home in it.

But, when early Christians experienced the power of the risen Christ, the world they knew was suddenly changed into a strange world. There is only one God so many shrines of gods didn't make sense to them any longer. The temple street they walked everyday suddenly became a strange place.

When people experienced the power of the resurrection in Christ, the old and familiar ways of social relationship with others suddenly became strange. Christians interacted with each other as brothers, sisters, and siblings across societal boundaries. Old social boundaries were broken and the relationship between slaves and masters, husbands and wives, Gentiles and Jews had to be redefined in light of their faith in resurrection.

As apostle Paul said in the Letter to Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:27-29)

God's love created a new community. Now, masters and slaves became siblings. A husband did not own a wife but they became companions in faith. Christians included everyone into their fellowship and this expansive and inclusive character of Christian identity was unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable for those inside and outside its communities. Christian practices of mutual love across societal boundaries were strange and even disturbing to many people.

What early Christians were doing was like promoting boundless love across national boundaries in this divisive world today. After the Covid-19 pandemic, I have read increasing numbers of Facebook posts promoting exclusive in-group love things like, “If the Beef, Pork and Chicken isn't raised and processed in the USA, it shouldn't be sold in the USA” or “No to Made

in China.” Negative views of China continue to increase. In this situation, if I shout on Warwick Ave, that as Christ taught us, ‘love your neighbors and even your enemies,’ we need to love Chinese people as our brothers and sisters, how would people react to me? It’s not difficult to imagine how people would react. Right? “People may say, if you don’t love America, go back to your country!” I may hear a lot of “F” words.

In crisis situations, it’s easier to blame others than promote inclusive love for others. Hating your enemy is much easier than embracing them. This is what we hear all the time in political arenas.

Fred Craddock, who was a preaching professor at Emory University, wrote of his experience at a prayer gathering right after the Gulf War broke out. After the declaration of the Gulf War, Christians in Atlanta had gathered for prayer. They sang songs together, read the scripture and prayed together for a long time. A young man, who seemed to be a freshman in college sat next to him.

In the course of the sentence prayers, the young man asked that God be with the women and the children in Iraq who would be hurt and killed in the war.

When it was over, a man in his mid-fifties came over to that young man and said, “Are you on Saddam’s side?” He said, “Uh, no sir.” Then the man said, “Well, you’re praying for the wrong people.”

I think that this is a clear example of how in-group love can be easily turned to out-group hatred even in Christian communities. This kind of in-group love is the love our nation demands of us. But Jesus’ love does not fortify only in-group love. Jesus’ love does not build a fence between groups. Rather, the love of Jesus broadens the boundaries of love. So following Jesus can make people uncomfortable and disturbed.

Living in your home as a stranger!

But We are Christians first. Earth is not our home. We are ‘resident aliens’ who live by the rule of God first. Jesus Christ taught two greatest commandments. “Love God with all your heart. And love your neighbors as yourself.” Instead of merely following the rules of our society, we need to remember that we are resident aliens and we are bound to God’s rule of love. As Peter said, “Friends, this world is not your home, so don’t make yourselves cozy in it.” Don’t indulge your American ego at the expense of your soul! Living a Godly life following the love commandments is not easy. It sounds burdensome like carrying a cross.

But my friends, you are not alone on this faith journey. There are many other resident aliens living in this world but not of this world. As you can see in this picture, we are making our 90th church anniversary cross by assembling small crosses. Small crosses with decorations and prayers have been delivered to my office. I love watching how you decorate your crosses. Each cross reflects your life story and faith journey in this world as resident aliens. Your crosses and your stories will be put together into our 90th anniversary cross. We will carry our crosses together in this world as faithful people of God whose citizenship is in the Kingdom of God.

The cross we carry will bridge the chasms of this divided world and be the way of love and reconciliation. Amen.