

Scriptures: Acts 2:14, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23

Eastertide

Today is the third Sunday of Easter in the Church calendar – there are fifty days of Eastertide, between Easter Sunday and Pentecost. Using the Church calendar and the lectionary keeps us rooted in God’s word, the Bible, rather than going off down a rabbit trail of favored topics that some pastors, even here in Shelby County, are apt to go after. Sometimes hearing the Scriptures the way we do – through the assigned readings – is hard. They convict us of our need to repent, like the passage we heard earlier today from Acts. If you receive the Sidney Daily News, you saw another lectionary passage assigned for this week in the *Your Pastor Speaks* article, from Luke’s Gospel. That account records the events of two of the followers of Jesus en route from Jerusalem on that first Easter afternoon, on their way to their home in the village of Emmaus, roughly seven miles away.

The two disciples interact with Jesus, without recognizing Him for who He is. They thought He was a stranger. The account closes with the famous phrase, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the road, while He was opening the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). In that article, I wrote a comment, I’ll say it this morning to get you thinking, because it’s something the Church in America surely needs to repent of. “How often is Jesus with us – right beside us, speaking to us – and yet we do not recognize Him? If we’re honest, He’s present with us, and ignored by us, more often than not!”

Our epistolary reading today, from 1 Peter, also examines the shape of our lives, from an Easter Resurrection point of view. If you have your Bible or Bible app, turn with me to 1 Peter 1:17-23. I’ll be reading from the New International Version. **Read 1 Peter 1:17-23.**

Defined by Labels

You know, some of the things Peter tells the ancient church in Asia Minor must have struck them as fairly odd. Some of what he tells us today strikes us as weird. We live in a society that’s all about us. “Me, me, me, me, me.” Right? “I want this or that,” “My way is the best way.” There are some in the Church who would have us believe that they know Jesus and what His will is for us, even better than Peter!

Our society and culture defines us by our work. I’m a husband, parent, teacher, pastor, son, nephew, friend. You also wear multiple hats as well, I’m sure. Some folks get hyper-fixated on the labels. When I was in high school now King Charles and his wife, Diana, went through a messy divorce. You’d think that people living here in Ohio, surrounded by cornfields, wouldn’t have a care in the world about all that high society stuff. The sad saga of their split up was conversation fodder in lunches and study halls

for weeks. Around the same time, one of the girls in my class told us her mom had bought a title for her dad for his birthday.

Did you know you could do that? You can – this classmate’s mom bought her dad a British title. If you pay a high enough price to some outfit over in England, they’ll award you a lifetime appointment as a Duke or Duchess of Falderal and Fiddle-de-dee. Those aren’t the real names, of course! But you, too, can get special treatment and recognition in fancy restaurants by making reservations under some fantastic name or title. Now, if you can’t afford the several thousand it costs to process you as a Duke or Duchess, they’ll happily lower the cost, and make you a Baron or Count. And with your title, they even give you a 1 sq. ft. piece of real estate in the highlands of Scotland. Woo-hoo! Now you’re connected to the royal family!

Our Focus: On Neighbor or Self?

Talk about living the high-life! This particular girls’ family wanted recognition and to be well-known by everyone. That’s the gist of our culture. Think about some of the popular sitcoms that have been on TV over the last thirty or forty years. *Friends* was one popular show from the 1990’s. In the 1980’s, a popular show theme song said, “Sometimes you wanna go, Where everyone knows your name. And they’re always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, Our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name.” Do you know that show, *New Hope? Cheers!* Right. That’s the culture we live in. It’s the way the world says we should be. Well-known. *Friends* – but not in the sense we get from being friends, biblically – the characters on that show were all pretty superficial.

Weak, superficial, and focused on self-aggrandizement is what the world would very much like us to be. Look what Peter tells us today. “Since you call on a Father who judges each one’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear,” (1 Pet. 1:17). I know, we hear that phrase “reverent fear,” and instantly think, “we have something to be afraid of.” That’s not what Peter means. What he’s saying is an old-timey way of saying we need to love and honor God. That’s what reverent fear is – loving and honoring God. How do we do that? Jesus tells us in the gospels – we do this by loving our neighbor. The proof is in the proverbial pudding. So if we say we love God, but can’t stand being around somebody, we have a problem! If we can’t handle being around a certain type of person – maybe that person looks or lives differently than us – we have a problem.

What do we do when we realize we have a problem with a neighbor who isn’t like us? They look different. Maybe they don’t shower daily, so they stink. I saw a post this week on Facebook where a homeless man was going every morning into a small town’s churchyard down south, and was stripping down to bathe in a water fountain the church has in their courtyard. What do you think about that? The church people were bent out of shape. I guess the guy’s done this a couple times before. You know what a

lot of people were posting as a comment on the article? “Call the cops!” That was their solution to the situation. I suspect that’s how the world would respond in seeing such a sight. We’re supposed to be different from the world. How about opening up the church building and letting the guy come inside and take a hot shower in an actual private bathroom? Now, maybe they don’t have a shower – the article didn’t have any pictures of the church or the fountain with it – but they could at least let him use their restroom, give him some soap, and he could get freshened up at the sink. Wouldn’t you think?

Called to Love

Now right there is an opportunity for that local church to do a great thing for another human being – and probably multiple other homeless people in that community – of showing love of neighbor in a life-changing, powerful way! I know if it were us in that town, you would open this place up and let people come in and use our shower rooms. That’s basic hospitality right there – seeing a need and meeting it. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” the writer of Hebrews says, “for by doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it,” (Heb. 13:2). That’s the expectation which Jesus has of us – that we do what we can to meet the needs we see around us in the world. Whether we agree with a person’s lifestyle, hair color, criminal past, addiction, and ten thousand other things which could cause us to be disagreeable towards them, or not. We are called – you and I, and everyone else who claims to love and follow our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – are called to love. We’re called to love unconditionally. Period. Without expectations. Without conditions. Without exceptions. The people we’re called to love, which is all people – they may rob us blind and break our hearts in the process of letting them into our lives. He calls us to love them anyhow

You see, He loves us this way, and we surely break His heart all the time. The Church breaks the heart of Christ. He loves us anyway. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or defect,” (1 Pet. 1:18-19), Peter says. Society, our culture, puts a high value on “stuff.” We have to have stuff. We have to have important titles and we deserve privileges based on the titles which tell other people who we think we are, and how important we think we are. Our culture has an entitlement mindset. We think we’re “owed” by society, because we’re told we’re so important by the things we do. Our roles and duties become a source of pride.

Pride, we’re told in the Holy Scriptures, is sin. It so easily captivates and snares us. Do we think we’re better than someone else? The Pharisees and Sadducees of Bible times thought they were better than the regular people of the day. Are we modern day Pharisees and Sadducees? If we are – and I believe there are many in the Church, in general, who are – we need to repent. We need to pray to God for forgiveness. What is the thing of which you most need to repent? Where do you need to feel God’s grace pour into your life? In one account of Jesus’ life, people were bringing children to Him

to be blessed. His disciples tried to run them off, and Jesus told them, “Let the children come to Me, for the kingdom belongs to such as these.” Do you need to come to Him? If you need a prayer – if you want to pray, if you want to leave all your junk at the foot of the cross today – He says “Come.” So, I’m going to pause here, we’re going to play some soft music, and have some time for silent contemplation and prayer. (Play music, and then fade it out when I walk back up to pulpit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-kF_iPJZJo).

Loosening the Bonds

Living like Pharisees and Sadducees is precisely the empty way of life to which Peter’s speaking. In those days there were some who thought they had to convert to Judaism – the Jewish religion and culture – before they could follow Christ. So they jumped through all the hoops. At whatever age they decided to convert, the guys were circumcised. Jesus doesn’t care about all that showy stuff – He just loves us. He loves us as we are – and loves us enough to not leave us where we’re at. He gives us His own Holy Spirit to live in our hearts – to be Lord of our lives – and to transform us into a new person.

Jesus is so cool! Peter says, “Jesus was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake,” (verse 20). He reveals Himself – He takes the nails and dies – for our sake. He raises three days later – you know why? For our sake. To prove who He is to us. To prove His love for us even triumphs over death. “Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God,” (verse 21).

Is your faith and hope in God this morning, New Hope? He puts His Spirit into us and changes us. Look what Peter says next. “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers and sisters, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God,” (verses 22-23). We prove we love Him, and that we are His children – when we love our brothers and sisters. Even the ones who are weird, who live differently, who don’t worship like us. Even those who don’t believe the same things from the Bible that we do. We love them anyhow. We’re called to love. And in so doing, we loosen the bonds this sin-sick world has placed around our hearts and minds – and theirs.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, so often we get weighed down with the cares of the world. We view people as objects to cast aside once we’ve gotten what we want from them, and view material possessions as priceless artifacts. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, so Your Spirit would flow through us into those around us, to the end that all people would be brought into the Light of Christ, in Whose name we pray, Amen.