

“Aliens and Exiles: 6) Living the Christian Life”

a sermon by

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Text: “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you” (I Peter 5:10).

Over the past several years there has been a good bit of attention given to what is sometimes called “the coarsening of culture.” By that is meant the fact that our culture is becoming less disciplined, less characterized by certain restraints and virtues, and more violent, selfish, and out of control. I was reminded of this during the past week when I read news reports concerning Michael Vick, the quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons. Vick was charged this past week with owning a house where dogfights were a common occurrence, mostly with pit bulls trained to maim and kill each other. The charges included a series of things that almost seem too cruel to be possible—electrocuting, drowning, and shooting dogs that were injured or failed to win.

There are other evidences of this “coarsening of society”—the incessant interest in our culture with young women such as Paris Hilton, Lindsey Lohan, and Britney Spears. In many ways these are tragic young women whose lives have been glamorized, yet they hardly provide role models for young people today.

I.

One of the deep and abiding concerns of the letter of I Peter is the Christian life. The author of this letter writes to a group of “aliens and exiles.” He admonishes them to demonstrate a worthy life not only to their fellow Christians, but also to those around them that are a part of a pagan society. He encourages them to discipline themselves and to be alert. He warns them of the power of evil in the world and speaks of the devil as a roaring lion.

As Presbyterians, we have often put a great deal of emphasis on the Christian life. John Calvin understood that salvation or forgiveness was not the goal of the life. The goal of human life was to glorify God by living our existence in service to God and to our neighbors. So what constitutes the Christian life? There are several aspects of the Christian life that are essential to faith.

II.

The first is a sense of gratitude and humility. I Peter calls us to “humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God” (I Peter 5: 6). Gratitude and humility belong together. The grateful person is humble, and the humble person is grateful. This month’s *Christianity Today* features an article by Tony Snow, who is a graduate of Davidson College and the Press Secretary to President Bush, in which he reflects on his own life and faith. A husband and father of three children, Snow found out recently that the colon cancer he had battled several years ago had returned. Suddenly, he was faced with more chemotherapy and treatment. Through it all, he writes, his faith did not abandon him. “The moment you enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death,” he observed, “things change.” Tony Snow spoke of how his faith sustains him, how the examples of others has helped him, and of his confidence that no matter what happens to him, he believes that his life is lived in the hollow of God’s hand.

John Calvin once characterized the sum of the Christian life as gratitude to God. Certainly, that is a key component. Gratitude helps us to understand that what we have is a gift of God. The evangelist Dwight L. Moody once told of a very successful business man who came to see him. “I’m a self-made man,” said the business man. “I am a self-made man.” Moody looked at the man and said, “Well, you certainly have removed a great burden from the shoulders of Almighty God.” Who of us could really say that we are a self-made person? Even the most successful of us realize that everything that we have is a gift of God. So often, as I look at my own life, I am grateful for parents who loved me and who provided a stable family for me. I am grateful for teachers and others who provided educational opportunities for me.

Gratitude and humility provide us with the capacity to rejoice in what we have and not always to be jealous and envious of those who have more than we have. One of the greatest preachers of Scotland in the 19th Century was a man by the name of Alexander Whyte. For years, he ruled the pulpit of the Free Saint George’s Church in Edinburg like a king. One day the church called Hugh Black to be his junior colleague. The citizens of Edinburgh used to say that in the morning Whyte blackballed the saints and in the evening Black whitewashed the sinners. But as the years passed, something happened. Alexander Whyte saw his junior colleague forging to the front. He was a younger man, and he had a note that caught the ear of the younger

generation. He had a wider influence and larger congregations. Whyte once told a friend of what a bitter struggle with jealous fear the situation had caused him. The friend, knowing how gracious and lovable Whyte was and absolutely loyal to his colleague, would not believe it. "Ah", said Whyte, "you don't know the black depths of the human heart."

"Perfect love," writes the author of I John "casts out fear." Certainly a sense of gratitude and humility are essential to the Christian life.

III.

The Christian life is also characterized by the capacity to detach oneself from things. The Christian is one who rejoices in the sheer wonder of being alive and in the goodness of creation. Throughout the creation story in Genesis 1 there is a refrain heard again and again. "And God saw that it was good." As Christians, we acknowledge that we come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing. Christians are called to live with things and possessions but also to live as though we are not defined by our possessions. Jesus reminded his followers that human life is far more than the abundance of possessions. The Apostle Paul once observed that he knew how "to abound and how to be abased."

One of the remarkable aspects of the life of John Calvin was his indifference to money. Calvin never owned anything nor had any desire to do so. When he died, he was buried at his request in a pauper's grave in an unmarked grave. "The power of that heretic," said one Pope about Calvin, "was his indifference to money." Say what you will about Calvin, but he was not for sale.

Certainly, that was true about Jesus. He lived a nomadic life with no real regard for possessions. "Foxes have dens," he said, "the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Now, to be sure, our situation today is very different from the situation of Jesus or even of a reformer such as John Calvin. Most of us understand the importance of exercising care and control over our wealth. The education of children, planning for retirement, and caring for loved ones demands great skill and planning. But having said that, most of us would probably have to admit that most of the time, our possessions control us far more than we control our possessions.

IV.

Then too, the Christian life is defined by the notion of simplicity or integrity. That is a pervasive theme in our tradition. John Calvin was acutely aware of this. "The rich must live simply," he once observed, "or the poor will not live at all." Calvin reacted very negatively to the excesses of the medieval church with its emphasis on pageantry, ostentatiousness, and wealth. For Calvin the Christian is called to live in a simple manner whether it has to do with the automobiles we drive, the houses we live in, or any aspect of our lives.

Today, we live in a culture that does not understand this. Almost at every turn we are confronted with conspicuous consumption that is particularly troubling in a world where so

many are poor. Many neighborhoods in our city are being ruined by oversized house (McMansions) that often intrude on others and mar the character of a neighborhood.

Integrity is also a characteristic of our language and our lives. Harry Frankfurt, a retired professor at Princeton University, has recently written a book in which he attacks the deceptive misrepresentations that are so much a part of society. For example, recently a United States Senator confessed to be part of a prostitution ring in Washington, D.C. This is a man who has consistently paraded himself as a “family values” person and now his actions bear witness to something very different.

Jesus reserved some of his bitterest attacks for people who pretended to be one thing, when in fact they were something else. Matthew 23 contains one of the strongest attacks on religious leaders in all of literature. Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees of his day “blind guides.” They tried to lead others and they could not lead themselves. He called them “whited sepulchers.” They were clean on the outside and on the inside they were filled with dead bones.

Throughout the teachings of Jesus there is an emphasis on sincerity and simplicity. For Jesus it was necessary that there be a consistency between a person’s deeds and his words. He encouraged his disciples to let their “yes” be a “yes” and their “no” be a “no.”

V.

Then, too, the Christian life is characterized with a deep sense of obligation, responsibility, and accountability. The Apostle Paul reminds us that “we are not our own, but that we are bought with a price.”

As Presbyterians, we have also emphasized the importance of the city. John Calvin, the great Reformer, sought to shape the life of the city of Geneva, Switzerland to conform to the teachings of the New Testament. John Knox attempted the same kinds of reforms in Edinburgh. The pilgrims who came to this country sought to build the “New Jerusalem.”

The mission of First Presbyterian Church in this city is characterized by the motto of the church “For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte.” As a center city church, we have a long history of working with the urban poor, be they homeless, street people, or children of urban neighborhoods. There are many churches today that simply exist for themselves. They are, for the most part, inwardly directed. But a healthy church is a church that always bears on its heart the concerns of those Jesus referred to as “the least of these.”

One should never take for granted the existence of a church. Churches, like all institutions are frail, and can be easily destroyed in a matter of a few short years. Recently, one of our ministers, Jim Miller, told me of his visit to Scotland several months ago upon the death of his mother. While in Scotland, he visited the city of Perth, where as a young minister he served on the staff of St. John’s Cathedral, one of the great historic churches in Scotland. Jim said that in the 1970’s there were several thousand people who worshipped in that church every Sunday morning. In the evening two thousand people would line up to attend the Sunday evening

services. When Jim visited the church several months ago, he discovered that it had been closed. There was simply no one there.

Let us not take for granted the gifts that God has given to us. We are not our own. We are called to demonstrate lives of service to God and to one another.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!