

"Windows to the World: Hope"

April 10, 2016 – FPC Charlotte

*1 Peter 3:13-22 Common English Bible (CEB) STARTING WITH V 13*

*Who will harm you if you are zealous for good? But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don't be terrified or upset by them. Instead, regard Christ as holy in your hearts. Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience. Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ may be ashamed when they slander you. It is better to suffer for doing good (if this could possibly be God's will) than for doing evil.*

*Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous. He did this in order to bring you into the presence of God. Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit. And it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison. In the past, these spirits were disobedient— when God patiently waited during the time of Noah. Noah built an ark in which a few (that is, eight) lives were rescued through water. Baptism is like that. It saves you now— not because it removes dirt from your body but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God. Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at God's right side. Now that he has gone into heaven, he rules over all angels, authorities, and powers.*

When Dorothy Gale woke up in her own bed after a terrible tornado, she seemed surprised to be where she was. "You're all here" she exclaimed as she awoke. Looking around she took roll, claiming each of her loved ones had been with her in Oz. "You were there, and you were there..." The message we are to get at this point is that Dorothy never left Kansas. While she was away, desperate to find home again, everything that home meant to her had with her all along. We can be homesick while never leaving home and we can be homesick for a place we've cannot reach.

This epistle we read from just now is to a group of people who felt far from home; home in the sense of belonging and welcome. They were called resident aliens or transient strangers. For some in our community that is very, very real identity. Sadly, as human beings, it seems to be in our nature to separate people into "us" and "other". The audience of this letter, known as Peter to the readers, encouraged them with these words "once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God".

But life has a way of knocking down this sanctuary of belonging. We do not always see or feel "home". What we do see too often is a lack of home- literally, socially and spiritually.

Charlotte is homesick, too many of our citizens are sick, physically ill because of our lack of proper housing. We are not just longing for home, we are physically ill for lack of one. To be sick for home can make us ill, isolated and disconnected.

You can also live in the grandest estate, have many keys to many doors in your possession and still live like a resident alien if you do not feel valued for who you are. Transient strangers are those who live, work, eat and reside in our communities but are ridiculed or pushed to the fringe because their community says they don't bring anything of value to the rest of us.

There are vast differences between us and first century Christians and Peter's encouragement to those persecuted for their faith and marginalized from society may seem hard to relate to. But the question of identity and belonging are timeless. Our series Window-ha the World, asks us sitting in these pews to examine how we view the world beyond these walls. But the windows also sharpen our ideas on how the world views us.

This theology of identity, a bedrock of the Judeo-Christian faith, forces us to examine our lives to see if we have more in common with the kingdom of God or the empire Peter talks about. The epistle writer knew that to obey Christ meant to separate from the empire of the time. We are also asked to differentiate from an empire that creates poverty, values greed and abuses the earth's resources. As people of faith we are called to examine the identity we claim and live out to see if it in fact clashes with the identity we are marked with at our baptism.

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If we do not claim the empire as our foundation, if we claim Christ as our King then what does that look like?

The answer given in this reading and in one of our stained glass windows is: HOPE. We come into a sanctuary like this not to escape from the world but rather to see the world more clearly and to understand how God is at work in that world and in our lives. These windows are not meant to cut us off from the world like blinds but instead serve as lenses through which we see the world as God does.

The McAden window was installed in 1897 and holds a few mysteries. Unlike most of the other windows it does not reflect an obvious biblical text or doctrine. Adding to its mystery is its location, for a window entitled Hope it was placed in a rather dim setting which makes some of the details difficult to see in the morning light. It was presented to the church by Mrs Rufus McAden in memory of her two sons who died at 28 and 29. They were descendants of Rev. Hugh McAden, ordained in 1759 as an early missionary to this area, before NC was even a state.

The window is a copy of a famous painting by Edward Burnes-Jones, called "Hope", commissioned about twenty years before this window was commissioned. The woman is personification of Hope. She reaches upward even while she seems to be held within that small frame by the bars behind her and the chains on her ankle. She holds apple blossoms in her hands and in the original painting there are periwinkles around her feet, a symbol for those facing death. The original painting was supposed to be of a young woman dancing, but the artist, Jones, was grieving over the death of his partner and close friend so instead turned dancing feet into shackled feet. That is a lot of grief for a piece of art entitled HOPE.

In the book "The History of FPC" it says this about the McAden window:

*"It would be presumptuous for this compiler to attempt to interpret the meaning of this window, but as one sees the figure chained to the post on which the word hope is inscribed, note the veil above and the cross above the veil gleaming in the sunlight, one is led to think that it has a very special meaning to each viewer"*

I'm going to go ahead and be presumptuous. This window tells us of the necessity of hope in times of trouble.

And it asks the question of us, as scripture often does, to what are we chaining ourselves? Like the woman in the glass window what metaphorical post we are chained to?

We are all chained to something. To what, then, do we choose to be bound to? This is of course far greater than the team we support or the company we work for. It goes deep into how we view purpose and suffering. Rev. Gordon McClellan has said, "Suffering endured without connection to a greater purpose-suffering that we experience while void of any sense of a larger identity not defined or bound by the suffering – produces only self-pity, fear and doubt." Feasting

If you can see yourself as the woman in that window what would you say you are you hitched to? What connects you to something beyond yourself? When I am wanting to re-connect to humanity, I take public transportation. It is useful for many reasons but it has a grounding effect on me as well. Which is why I resonated to strongly to this story. A passenger on a subway in a large city shared this:

*I saw the most incredible display of humanity on the train. A six foot five man suffering from drug abuse and/or mental health issues was being very aggressive on the bus with erratic movements, cursing, shouting, etc. While everyone was scared, this one seventy year old woman reached out her hand, tightly gripping his hand until he calmed down, sat down silently, with eventual tears in his eyes. I spoke to the woman after this incident and she simply said, "I'm a mother and he needed someone to touch." And she started to cry. Don't fear or judge the stranger on the bus: life does not provide equal welfare for all its residents.*

In this moment a man became unchained, unmoored, to anything good. He could not see his self worth and thus the worth of other human beings. Seeing him loosened and adrift a fellow human being reached out to him and grounded him for a few moments until he was himself again. The self that God means for him to be. Not alone, not sick, not addicted...but loved, known and unafraid.

How do we view the world through a window that symbolizes bondage to hopefulness? Like baptism, we are now enabled to view ourselves and the world with a new lens. Baptism, in the reformed tradition, is not a conversion. It is an invitation to look at the world differently, starting with our own self assessment. We are not broken or unfixable and neither is our neighbor. The world is not lost, it is not evil.

To begin to see our lives as intrinsically bound up with Christ means we need to learn to see what is not bound up in Christ. For too many of us, we are chained by success, productivity, appearance, wealth, popularity and position. But our value is not tied to those, our price of admission to baptism is none of those things, only Christ's love for us. In God we find our home.

That is our ultimate hope. Thanks be to God.