

“We Are God’s People,” FPC Marshfield, Easter 5,

May 14, 2017, Rev. Dr. Janet Wolfe

Texts: Acts 7:55-60; Ps.31:1-5,15-16; 1 Pet.2:2-10; Jn.14:1-14

Both 1 Peter and John were probably written in the late first or early second century. By that time, people were beginning to face persecution for their faith. John was written when Christianity had not yet split from Judaism but there was a lot of tension between other Jewish sects and the followers of Jesus. That context is important for understanding both of the passages that we read for today, and also for the understanding of the story of the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts, which we did not read.

1 Peter was likely a sermon or letter to newly baptized Christians. At the beginning of our passage, the readers are called “newborn infants.” They need “spiritual milk” to sustain them at the beginning of their growth in faith.

The next paragraph uses the metaphor of a “living stone” to describe Jesus. It draws on several psalms that use that metaphor, particularly #118:22, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” It is the basis for our middle hymn, “Christ is Made the Sure

Foundation.” Jesus is our sure foundation as we build our spiritual lives, both as individuals and as a community.

My favorite part of this reading is the last paragraph, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts 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.”

As the members of the Wednesday Bible study pointed out, this can be used in an exclusive way. We could interpret it as a way of saying that we are superior to others who do not believe, or who hold other faiths. However, it is a call to service, not to superiority. We are called to study scripture, to pray, and to proclaim the good news of the Gospel in both word and action. We are called to proclaim the Kingdom of God, where all are welcome and all are treated justly and fairly, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Next, week, this church will be electing new officers. The Presbyterian Church ordains deacons and ruling elders to service, as well as ministers of word and sacrament, also

called teaching elders. Our understanding of ordination is one of a call to service, not a call to superiority over others. The task of a minister is to be a “servant of the servants of God.” We who are ordained to office are not superior to the people of God. As I have reminded you before, the bulletin proclaims that the congregation is the minister. That is especially important as we continue without a pastor called to serve us. This paragraph from 1 Peter is one of the warrants from scripture to remind us that we are all ordained by our baptism to be the people of God and to serve our own people, the community and world in which we live.

1 Peter uses the term “new birth” to talk about our baptism and our welcome into the community of faith. Birth represents the beginning of our lifelong journey of growth in faith. Baptism is much more than a ceremony; it is the beginning of a journey as part of the community. It is not complete until our death. The Orthodox churches have a practice of giving a candle at baptism. It is burned on the anniversary of the baptism and then saved until the end of life, when it is burned one last time to symbolize the completion of the person’s journey. So when we are

confirmed, we do not “graduate from church,” but we need to continue to be nurtured in the faith throughout our lives. We all make changes in what we believe because of the influence of our mentors, because of changes in our life circumstances, and because of changes in the world. We as individuals change throughout our lives, and the church as a whole is undergoing major changes.

We don’t live in Christendom any more. The church does not hold secular power. Maybe its call at this time is to be prophetic, to be a critic of what is going on in secular governments and institutions. We will fulfill our calling better if we are not bound by a need to support all that is done by the secular powers. We need to be free to make a critique when the principalities and powers of this world take actions that threaten those we are called to serve, especially the most vulnerable among us. The writings of the prophets in Hebrew Scripture are full of challenges to the state and other worldly powers. For that reason, I do not think that the church should endorse political candidates, not just because we want to be tax-exempt, but because our membership includes diverse views on political issues. However, we need a strong

grounding in the teachings of Jesus and the nature of the Kingdom of God so we can seek justice and mercy for all.

The passage from the Gospel of John is the beginning of Jesus' "farewell discourse." In ancient literature, it was common to close out a hero's life with a last testament. It may seem strange that we read from this during the Easter season, but it is important to remember that in John, Jesus' death is his exaltation as well as his passion. There is never a time in John's account of the passion story that Jesus is not fully in control. During this season we stand not before a grave about to be filled, but before an empty tomb.

There are three important points about this passage. (1) "In my Father's house are many dwelling places." This passage is often used at funerals and it is interpreted to mean that Jesus prepares a place for us in heaven after we die. However, John's use of "eternal life" has as much to do with the present as it does with a life to come. It has to do with the quality of life now, in relationship with Christ and with one another. There is room at the table for all of us. A good example might be when a new child comes into the family. There may be a bit of jealousy from the older siblings, but

eventually, in a well-functioning family, that new child is loved and cherished just as much as the others. A part of our gospel lesson from last week, the story of the Good Shepherd, may help us understand this meaning of "eternal life." John 10:10b says, "I came that they (the sheep) may have life and have it abundantly." It has to do with the quality of life in relationship with God, with Jesus, and with one another.

Several years ago when I was still in Arpin, people were interested in questions surrounding organ donation. We invited Dr. Susan Mickel, a neurologist then a member of this church, to speak on the topic. She used this verse to make the point that it is not important how long we live, but how well we live. She encouraged us to make end of life decisions based on the quality, not the quantity of life. If a person is in a lot of pain and suffering and there is not much chance of improvement, perhaps it is better to let the person go, for we believe that God is with us in life and in death.

(2) "No one comes to the Father except through me." This passage is sometimes used to say that only Christians are saved. I do not believe that this is the intent of the passage. John wrote in a time when the church was a movement within

Judaism in the context of the multireligious Roman Empire. This interpretation continued throughout much of Christendom, after Constantine declared Christianity to be the official state religion. When Europe was colonizing much of the rest of the world, especially Africa and the Americas, it was used as a justification for conquering native peoples, even enslaving them. Wouldn't they be better off as slaves if they were Christian? They would not be subject to eternal damnation. However, in our postmodern world, we are much more like the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire. We live in a multireligious country and world. Will we be able to get along with and respect our neighbors of other faiths? Since changes in immigration practices in 1965, the number of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others has greatly increased in our own country. Our neighbors in Marshfield are no longer divided between Lutherans and Catholics, with a few Presbyterians and others. Partly because of the need for our medical complex to recruit doctors from other places, we now have enough Muslims to support a mosque. Some of our own members have practiced Buddhist meditation as a way of increasing health and growing in faith. Maybe we cannot be

so sure that God is only known through Jesus. As Karen Armstrong writes in her book, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, all the major faiths emphasize compassion and caring for our neighbors. Armstrong is a former Catholic nun who has become one of the foremost scholars of other faiths and interfaith relationship.

(3) "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." It is difficult to know what God is like. We all have many different concepts of God. But for John, because Jesus became fully human, he shows us what God wants from us as we seek to live a life of justice and mercy. We can know God and Jesus in many different ways. Our gospel from Luke on the Third Sunday of Easter showed us how we know Jesus in the stories of scripture and in the sharing of bread and wine at the table, which we will do shortly. We know God through transformative experiences. We know God through other people. My mentors were especially important in this. We know God through the community of faith. We know God through compassionate others of all faiths and no faith. "God welcomes all, strangers and friends. God's love is strong and it never ends."