

May 14, 2017 -- Olivet Church, Charlottesville
1 Peter 2: 2-10, John 14: 1-14

You are a Chosen Race... God's Own People

I lived for a short while in Tampa, Florida, part of the sprawling metropolitan area on Florida's west coast. I lived in downtown Tampa, but most downtown workers commuted long distances from their suburban homes to their workplaces. It may be a common real estate marketing technique in such places, but I remember driving along the outbound congested freeways in the evenings and seeing billboards advertising adjacent apartments or housing developments with these words: "If you lived here you would be home right now." Of course you can recognize the appeal such a promotion would have for someone sitting in gridlocked traffic thinking it will be another half hour, hour or more before they are home. Why put up with the stress, time, and money consumed in getting home; when you could be home already?

I want you to think about Jesus' statement in John's gospel in a similar light. I think that was the way it was intended; as good news offering great relief, assurance, and peace. "I am the way and the truth and the life" he says, "you can come to the father through me. In me, you can be home, enter into your eternal home of security and blessedness, peace and rest."

I know we tend to think of his statement as being exclusivist, judgmental, and condemning of those who are on their own pathway home, seeking home in other ways, seeking to live truthful, meaningful, loving lives apart from Jesus. These words, shared with a miniscule, minority, persecuted group of disciples, sound different in a time when Christianity has been the dominant and sometimes repressive and controlling religion. But Jesus' statement was first and foremost a source of peace, comfort, and joy. He would be leaving his followers and friends, and he would be preparing a place for them. And he would come again so that where he was, they could be also. To all who are anxious, struggling, troubled about living rightly, facing death, getting home, living with God their Maker, Jesus says: "you could be home right now!" Jesus offers that homecoming, that life, that blessed assurance to us. In him, through him, by his work on our behalf; we have a home in the Father's house. Because of his love for us; by his blood shed for us, we can be united with our Maker, at peace with our God, assured of a true, final, blessed home. And in and through him who is the way, the truth, and the life we can live into this new life, and enjoy the security of this final home now. "Because we know," the apostle Paul writes the Corinthians, "that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also, and will bring us into his presence... we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day... and we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

What is unique about the Christian faith, is that we come into a saving, secure relationship with God; we "close" on our eternal home, not by our efforts at finding the right way and making our way there, not by learning the right truths, and not by living the right life. Jesus was not like other teachers and spiritual leaders who taught saying "this is the truth, the way, and the life as I have discovered it and I commend it to you as the path of right living." Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." To respond to him, to trust him, to follow him, to live in him and

him in us, means that we enter into the way, the truth, and the life immediately. In him we arrive home already.

Otherwise we must strive, work, be good, make the grade, develop a resume in the hope that God will look with favor upon us and bless us. And we would live with a low grade anxiety about whether we have truly done enough, have made the passing grade, have indeed gained God's favor and blessing. We would still plugging along on a congested highway, tense, stressed, anxious when we could be home already.

You see with Jesus, with Christian faith our identity, our status, and our salvation does not result from our behavior and our actions... but rather it precedes them. Our actions and behavior arise out of the new life, the new identity, the new status we have in Christ, as we live in him who is the way, the truth, the life; as we live as those whose home is in God's house, whose citizenship is in the kingdom of God. "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." Peter did not describe early Christians that way because of their moral perfection, doctrinal orthodoxy or mission successes in the world. He actually describes his readers as "newborn infants who needed to grow into their salvation." Yet because they had come to Jesus Christ, they had become living stones themselves in the house of which he was the foundation, the cornerstone, a holy house, a temple, the dwelling place of God. They had come home already.

Where Christianity seems exclusivist is where it is gratefully, joyfully unique... in our salvation by God's grace, by God's unmerited favor, by God's treating us, not as we deserve, but out of God's great love for us ...so that not by doing, behaving, acting, working, achieving, ...but by God's grace and our trust in that grace we are saved, we arrive home already.

In fact, Christianity stipulates that we really cannot, can never, do enough, be good enough, become righteous enough, to stand and live in the presence of the Maker of heaven and earth, the giver of our lives.

Maybe you have had the experience of being terribly lost, so that even the directions you are given are not helpful to you, especially if you have a time constraint on your arrival. While serving in Waynesboro I agreed to officiate at a graveside funeral service at a church in the valley, a service being handled by a funeral home in Staunton. Now this was in the day before GPS devices were even heard of, much less available, so I called the funeral home for directions to the church. They seemed easy enough. Turn left on this road, when you crossed the bridge take a right, and I would see the church on one side of the road; the cemetery would be across from it. The only problem was that I thought I needed to look for a bridge over a stream or river and did not notice when I crossed a bridge over some railroad tracks. So by the time I came upon a bridge and made a right turn, I was hopelessly lost. With huge thunderclouds rolling in and the time for the start of the service fast approaching I stopped and asked for directions... which included turning at this big oak tree, going over a hill, and looking for a trash dumpster. And I knew I would not be able to get there from here... unless someone would take me, unless I could go with someone who knew the way.

The summer after I finished college I went to Tuscaloosa, Alabama for a job interview. Of all the disastrous journeys I've been on this one ranks near the top. I had an old Ford Mustang that I was restoring and there were certain parts I needed before I could make that trip, including some exhaust piping. With little money I went to a junk yard and bought the parts I needed and worked late into the evening getting the car ready for the trip. It would take a long time to tell you all the details but let me just tell you that after the exhaust pipe dropped down and burned through the rear brake line I found myself on the outskirts of Birmingham trying to hitch a ride. After a good while standing by the road with my thumb out, I found a nearby pay phone and called to explain my predicament. "I just would not be able to make it" I said in sad exasperation. "Hold on a minute, I was told, there is someone coming from Birmingham who can give you a ride!"

Christ comes to us in those moments in life when we recognize that we can go not further, will not reach our destination, we are lost, we are helpless, we are down on the side of the road. Christ comes to us, not with a judgmental, exclusivist, condemnatory "I am the way, the truth, the life!" But rather he comes with words of blessed peace, joy, and assurance: "come with me; come unto me all who are wearied and heavy-laden; I am the way, the truth, the life."

Those who know the intractable nature of their selfishness, stubbornness, pride, and envy. Those who know the stranglehold of addictions. Those who know the suffocating effect of guilt. Those who know the corrosive force of prejudice and racism. Those who know the reality of their sin and separation from God and God's will know. We know innately, know instinctively that we cannot make it home on our own. If our God had not, out of steadfast, loving compassion, come to us in Jesus; we would be without hope.

"I am the way, the truth and the life," Jesus said, after talking about coming home, being home, having an eternal home. "You could be home already!"

One of the most beautiful stories Jesus told of homecoming involved two sons. The younger one left home, squandered the family inheritance, dishonored the family name, separated himself from the father yet came to his senses and realized, "he could be home already." The older son in his self-righteous, entitlement mentality stomped out in jealous anger and the father went out to tell him, "You are home already."

Philip Yancey writes of a young woman who had a conflict with her family and left home in the company of a young man, who soon left her to fend for herself. She struggled along until she became ill during a fierce winter, was unable to work, found herself rummaging around in garbage dumpsters looking for food. One day she remembered, her parents gave these scraps of food to the family dog. "I'm sorry," she wrote to them, "I want and need to come home. I'll get off at the bus station. If there is no one there to meet me, I will understand and will get back on the bus." She stepped off the bus but could not see her parents ...because there was such a large crowd of family and friends gathered ...and her eyes were blurred with tears because as the bus pulled in she had seen a big banner stretched across the bus station with her name on it and the words, "Welcome Home!" Her mom stepped forward to hug her. "Mother, I'm sorry," she

started to say. “Welcome home,” she said, “We have a great dinner with your favorite dishes prepared for you at home.”