

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
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“Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.” -- 1 Peter 2:10

Easter was less than a month ago, and according to today's Scripture readings, we're already in the weeds as far as Christian believers and the rest of the world are concerned.

The reading from Acts is the conclusion of the very sad story of the stoning of Stephen, an early Christian believer. The gospel reading from John shows Jesus reassuring his anxious disciples, and the epistle reading from First Peter is directed to small groups of Christians already suffering persecution just a few decades after Jesus' lifetime.

It hasn't taken long for the believers of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ to begin to experience opposition from the world, and that's one of the things we need to know this morning about being the people of God: if we're not experiencing opposition of some kind from some quarter for some reason, we're not doing Christianity right.

Now, we early-twenty-first-century, middle-American, middle-class, slightly-left-of-center Christian people are always a little flabbergasted that anyone would take offense at us; and that bewilderment should show us the gulf that exists between us and the people of God. People genuinely committed to living out the values of God's realm should expect to meet criticism, misunderstanding, and opposition as they seek to make Jesus' way of life their way of life. Jesus wasn't crucified because he was nice; he was crucified because he got under people's skin by showing them the great gulf between how it's possible and desirable to live and how most of us actually do it. That's not good news to most of us, and we don't want to hear it.

Jesus was a bachelor and had some pretty tough things to say about the nuclear family, for example, both of which facts we blithely ignore.

Jesus owned no property and he had some pretty harsh things to say about the ramifications of private ownership, which we also ignore.

Jesus suffered crucifixion rather than take up arms against his opponents, despite the fact that this was exactly what his earliest followers expected and wanted him to do, and we Christians have ignored Jesus the peacenik since at least the fourth century.

Jesus saw himself and was seen by some of his followers as part of that tradition of Israel's prophets that extended all the way back to Abraham, and at the heart of that prophetic tradition was the divinely-given ability to see deeply into the present as well as see what was coming. A prophet is someone who sees what the majority of people choose to overlook, and what most people choose to overlook most of the time is their own sinfulness. We are offended when people tell us we're wrong, and the main reason we take offense is because

prophets are telling us about the big picture of collective sinfulness while we refuse to take responsibility for our role in maintaining and perpetuating group unrighteousness.

This is the point that Reinhold Niebuhr tried to make back in 1932 in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Perfectly decent people can collude in abominations, and perfectly decent people never want to admit that. Christians in the American south never wanted to admit that slavery was evil, and I heard just the other night of a southern tour guide telling the passengers on a Mississippi River cruise ship not too many years ago that slaves in the south didn't have it as bad as abolitionists suggested. Christians in Germany never wanted to admit that Nazism was evil, and there were more than a few Christians inside and outside of Germany after the Second World War who felt that Hitler got a raw deal. And there are Christians in South Africa today who will never admit that apartheid was evil.

And we could go on and on. So as not to stick out, perfectly decent people will sanction dreadful decisions made by their group.

Some of us can remember the pitched battles in this country over the Vietnam war, and the vilification of people like Joan Baez and Jane Fonda and William Sloane Coffin and the Berrigan Brothers and Martin Luther King. People who opposed the Vietnam war were considered traitors and disloyal at the time by millions of Americans, but what did the deaths of over 58,000 American soldiers and the service of millions more accomplish? Our political and military leaders told us at the time that we were sacrificing our blood and treasure to stop the spread of communism, but Vietnam today is one of only four countries in the world that have one-party socialist systems officially espousing communism.

In our generation, we've been told that had to go to war in Iraq, that we had to go to war in Afghanistan, that we had to go to war in Syria, and that we may have to go to war – again – in Korea. And where are the Christian protests against this endless stream of combat? Has every Christian in this country forgotten that our first loyalty is to the Prince of Peace and not to whomever happens to occupy the White House? Christians, it seems to me, could do with a little persecution for opposing more than abortion and gay rights.

So we need to recover the prophetic witness of the Christian faith.

The second thing I'd like to lift up from this passage in First Peter is that the Christian faith is an experience of life-long growth. Verse two of chapter two tells us to long for "the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation."

Salvation, to use today's entrepreneurial language, is a growth industry. Salvation, like your adult face, is something you have to grow into. It's a process, more a verb than a noun. And you should hope and pray that the Christian you are today is neither the Christian you were twenty years ago nor the Christian you will be twenty years hence.

Forty years ago, I was a tee-totaling Christian who avoided not only alcohol but also the people who drank it. When I went off to the Big Ten Big Party School of Indiana University in the fall of 1977, if I learned that alcohol would be served at an event to which I'd been invited, I wouldn't attend. I hadn't lived long enough in those days to know that there are plenty of people in the world who can drink alcohol socially and responsibly, and even though I still don't drink because of the history of alcoholism in my family, I don't hesitate to serve a glass of wine or beer to dinner guests in my home.

For those who are paying attention, life is our best teacher, and people can and should change, in their Christian living, over time. I've said to you before that some people accumulate

seventy years' worth of experience by the time they're old, while other people accumulate only one year of experience repeated seventy times. Which of those kinds of person you will be will be a matter of choice on your part.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, began that denomination, which now numbers some 80 million adherents around the world, as a small group of Anglicans determined to grow in their faith by meeting together in small groups three or four nights a week, holding each other accountable for overcoming personal sins and developing Christian virtues, and delving deeply into study of the Bible and classic works of broad humanistic learning. Methodists, as they gradually became known, also devoted themselves to taking food to the poor, visiting lonely people in prison, and teaching orphaned children to read. Through the habitual practice of this "method" of sanctification, Wesley believed that people could achieve a degree of moral perfection in this life. That state was never assured and could never be taken for granted; only through the daily renunciation of the ego-driven self in favor of collective support and accountability could one hope to remain in a state of grace. Life for the early Methodists was a continual exercise in spiritual growth.

"Slow and steady wins the race" is the way some of us first learned the truth of persistent practice leading to eventual growth. Only the goddess of wisdom, Athena, was born full-grown from the head of Zeus, according to the ancient Greek mythographers; the rest of us have to grow into both wisdom and holiness. Even the twelve-year-old Jesus, according to Luke, "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and humans" after his parents lost track of him briefly on a trip to Jerusalem. Jesus may have been an amazing child, but Luke tells us that even he had to grow into the vessel for the Holy Spirit that allowed him to change the course of human history in a unique and decisive way.

So that's the second thing I think our passage from First Peter tells us about what it means to be God's people: we grow in grace and spiritual maturity.

And the third and final thing I'd like to lift up this morning is that being chosen is a mercy, not a burden.

Verse ten says, "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."

We Christians are a worrying bunch of people. We take ourselves far too seriously and the good news of Jesus Christ not seriously enough. We think that the salvation of the world depends on us, when it doesn't. The quote from Henri Nouwen on the front of this morning's order of service captures well, I think, one of the besetting sins of religious people: we've somehow got it into our heads and our hearts that worrying is the responsible thing to do, and that if we're not worrying we're somehow not doing our job.

Nothing could be further from the truth for the person who actually trusts in the gospel. The story of Jesus says that the worst that can happen – the murder of God Incarnate – has happened, and we're still here to proclaim the good news that the death of God on the cross was not the death of God in the world. We who have been chosen by God are here today to say that when humans have done their worst, God's love prevails. We who are God's people are the joyful singers of hymns and ringers of bells and shouters of hallelujah and planters of gardens and sowers of seed who look to the dawn and resurrection and life eternal for our inspiration, our hope, and our joy. That way of being in the world, my friends, is not a burden; next to existence itself, it is God's greatest mercy to each and all of us. To be called by God is to

be given a purpose, a meaning, a reason for living that secular people do not have. I've said to you many times that the reason I'm in this business is because I believe life is better with God than without God, and that better is a mercy.

Have you ever tended a group of children who wanted to play soccer or capture the flag or a game of cards? Until you explain what the rules of the game are, you can't play the game. You simply have unhappy chaos and, inevitably, tears. Children may be impatient while you're trying to explain how the game is played, but you and I know that in the long run it is a mercy to be shown where the goal posts are, where the lines on the field are and what they mean, and how much each card is worth.

Life, friends, works the same way. There are rules – better and worse ways of navigating the chaotic waters of living – and thousands of years of accumulated experience have shown at least the wiser among us that the better ways are the rules for playing the game of life.

Short-term gain and long-term loss is one of the rules of the game of life. We didn't make that up, we discovered it, and it was a mercy that we did. Love wins while hate makes losers of us all is one of the rules of life that we didn't make up; we discovered it, and that discovery, too, is a mercy. That there is one home for all of us earthlings to share is not a rule that we invented; it's a fact that we discovered, and to live with that fact as a guide or a rule is not a burden, it's a mercy. It saves us from the perpetual fear and struggle of selfish competition.

Those rules come with the package of being part of God's people. To be part of God's people is to be part of a vast and glorious experiment in living and in faith. It is to have permission to change course when something isn't working. It is to have a blueprint to return to when we're uncertain of the next step. It is to have a second family in which to be challenged and embraced when the questions and wounds of life inevitably arrive. It is to have hope to confront sorrow and despair.

"That is happiness," Willa Cather wrote in *My Antonia*, "to be dissolved into something complete and great." To be the people of God is not to be complete and it's not always to be great, but I firmly believe that in this world you will be hard pressed to find something more complete and something greater. Politics will not be it. Nationalism will not be it. Addiction will not be it. Hedonism will not be it. To be part of God's people is to be part of something great and good. That really is good news.

Happy Mother's Day.