

CLOSING SERMON: “GOD’S PILGRIM PEOPLE”

Carla Sunberg

2 Peter 1: ¹ *Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: ² May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³ His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. ⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. ¹¹ For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.*

We, who have gathered here these past few days are here as God’s pilgrim people, a people who are on a journey and wrestling with a metaphor that describes our current experience as exile. While there are some who would argue that exile isn’t the best metaphor and that maybe there are other metaphors that we need to embrace, we do recognize, “the story and study of the past, both recent and distant, will not reveal the future, but it flashes beacon lights along the way and it is a useful nostrum against despair.”¹ This is why we have used exile language and it stirs up in us conversations about the struggles that God’s pilgrim people are currently facing.

But what is a pilgrim? A pilgrim is defined as “a person who journeys to a sacred place for religious reasons.”²

I would suggest that we have traveled here – to this place – for religious reasons. For some of us this is sacred space – the J.B. Chapman chapel at Nazarene Theological Seminary! It doesn’t get much closer to the heart of Nazarene than this! And I would argue that those of us who find ourselves here and in this place have a deep love for a church which, for many of us, has raised us, fed us, nurtured us spiritually, and educated us. She may have her flaws – don’t we all – but I doubt so many of us would have been here this week if she were not dear and sacred to us – and if we didn’t desire for her to make her pilgrim journey as well.

¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, (2011-07-13). *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (p. 55). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Pilgrim definition, cited Sept. 24, 2016, online:
<https://www.google.com/search?q=pilgrim&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>

We have traveled here for religious reasons – because we are a religious people. We are Christians – in a world that no longer sees us as a favored people. The problem for some, is that we can look into the rear-view mirror and still see an era in which things were different. “Christian America had its golden age in the 1950s, after the hardships and victories of World War II and before the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. June Cleaver was its mother, Andy Griffith was its sheriff, Norman Rockwell was its artist, and Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale were its ministers.”³ But today, we no longer live in that golden era, because it seems as if our sacred space has been invaded and is being redefined for us by the world. As a religious people – as the Church of the Nazarene – we feel as if we have been placed in exile. Things just simply aren’t the way they used to be!

But, could it be that we, as pilgrims are discovering what Tim Green suggested -- that we are finding ourselves in a place of divine judgment? That this experience, which we may call exile, may be, in reality a wake-up call from God that we are no longer in sacred space – that we have deviated from the course. You see, we can’t move on to a new and different sacred space, as pilgrims, if we haven’t recognized that the place in which we currently find ourselves is no longer sacred. The call is to lament and confess before we can move forward in our journey.

Church, there is time-- for lament and confession before we can move on. For example, this chapel – this Nazarene “sacred space” sits in the heart of a city which has been very racially divided. Troost Ave., just two blocks west of us, has served as a dividing line, separating the people of this city. Within a few blocks of where we are today stood the old Kansas City First Church of the Nazarene, and at the bottom of the hill, our denominational headquarters. Decisions were made regarding relocation. I was here as a teenager, attending First Church and I know how painful those decisions were. But, is it possible that we have experienced a self-inflicted exile as we became complicit by succumbing to the draw of the world to be affluent and successful, and so we joined the white flight and headed to the suburbs?

Look at us as a people - we were a denomination that was birthed soon after the Civil War here in the United States. When people gathered in 1908 in Pilot Point, TX something unique happened. We were a people who united together from different churches and denominations, those from the North and the South. We crossed over social, political, and economic barriers to become The Church of the Nazarene. The folks from the South wondered how they would be accepted by the people from the North, and yet, God knit together this pilgrim people and led them to a sacred space. Somehow being transformed as the holy people of God superseded all that was going on politically in their world and they lived seeking the face of God. But where are we now? Are we committed to a unity that transcends our differences?

Critical self-examination may help us determine whether we are in an exile of our own making. Before we can move on, we may need to lament and repent. In doing so we can be stripped bare of the encroachments of the world and begin our sojourn to sacred space.

³ Robert P. Jones, (2016-07-12). *The End of White Christian America* (Kindle Locations 527-529). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

You and I, we are pilgrims on a journey, becoming the holy people of God. Therefore, we receive the words found in 2nd Peter where we are reminded that we are given **divine power** to live lives of godliness; we are given **precious and very great promises**, through which we can escape the corruption in this world, so that we may become **partakers of the divine nature**.

Let's consider Divine Power. People in exile lack power. The white Protestant church in America, "arguably the most powerful cultural force in the history of [the US] – has faded."⁴ The euro-centric church is in severe decline, and quite possibly grieves the loss of power. But could it be that we have become distracted by the wrong type of power? Roger Hahn so succinctly reminded us, "To the degree that the North American church today embraces the language of exile as a way of lamenting our loss of prestige, respect, and political power, we are out of sync with the New Testament church. We are also out of sync with major portions of the Christian church around the world today which have never experienced power, respect, and prestige in their culture."⁵ But if our lament becomes confession for having pursued prestige and power, then God is accomplishing his purpose in and for us.

The Scripture reminds us that we are to tap into divine power. You and I, we are pilgrims on a journey to a sacred place where we can experience that divine power. In the presence of divine power, worldly power becomes impotent. Divine power is manifested on the cross in the dispossession of worldly power by Christ. In the early centuries of Christianity they bore witness by living in that divine power. On the day of Pentecost they were empowered by the Holy Spirit and they were transformed. Those early Christians experienced the divine power of the kingdom of God and, as a result, they were no longer concerned about earthly power. They experienced the "already" of the kingdom and, we have been reminded, "Kingdom language is [the] 'end of exile language.'"⁶ This is why we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."⁷ That sacred space in which we are to live is the kingdom of God.

Not only do we experience **divine power** in that space, but we live with the **precious and very great promises**, through which we can escape the corruption in this world. Pastors – church leaders – students – we have been given precious and very great promises from our Lord, Jesus Christ, that will carry us through on this pilgrim journey. Troubling times can bring about great anxiety. Many pastors know the struggle of declining church attendance, the inevitable financial difficulties and more. As a result, we are searching for the latest quick fix, reading book after book, attending conference after conference and trying to imitate the work of the latest church guru.

But we have promises. The promise that God is faithful. The promise that God is love. The promise of resurrection. The promise of the gospel found in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The promise that the Lord will be with us, even to the end of the age.

⁴ Jones, Kindle Locations 551-553.

⁵ Hahn, 19.

⁶ Hahn, 14. Quoting from Scot McKnight.

⁷ Matthew 6:10. NRSV

But there is no promise that God's people would live in a world without problems. Jesus told his disciples "**In this world you will have trouble.** But take heart! I have overcome the world."⁸ The promise is for God's pilgrim people – living in that sacred space – where Jesus has promised to overcome the world. We don't need permission from this world to be about Jesus' business. Recently a new law was passed in Russia which restricts the rights of Christians to evangelize. They are no longer to invite people to church, or even to their homes for the purpose of telling others about Christ. But even though there are laws against evangelization, laws cannot stop followers of Jesus Christ sharing about the Lord. Early Christianity was not given legal authority by the world to preach, but the good news about Jesus spread like wildfire. We don't need to be given permission by this world to be about Jesus' business, because we are divinely empowered as we live in the promises of our Lord.

Listen carefully to the promise in 2nd Peter. We can escape the corruption in this world. While corruption takes many forms, it often takes us back to the issue of power. It was John Dalberg-Acton who said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He was speaking out against the corruption found in the church and the Papal attraction to power. Are we lamenting the loss of a power which we should have never had? We were never intended to have power at the hands of the world or political authority. Could it be that we gained that power by compromising with the world? I would suggest that we follow the admonition in 2nd Peter to live into the **precious and very great promises**, through which we can escape the corruption in this world, so that we may become **partakers of the divine nature**.

Becoming partakers of the divine nature will lead us to the most sacred of places for God's pilgrim people. You and I are invited into a deeply spiritual relationship with our most holy God. Gordon Smith said it well, that "We will need to develop deeply religious sensibilities – **the capacity to live with a deep appreciation of life in the Spirit that fosters our capacity to live in dynamic union with Christ.**"⁹ We need to learn to abide in the sacred space, which for us should be in fellowship with the Triune God. The Greek word here is *koinonia* – we are to be in *koinonia* – fellowship, partaking of the divine nature. The journey for God's pilgrim people will lead us to the sacred space of fellowshiping with the triune God so that I can bring others, particularly the oppressed and disempowered – into the fellowship of the kingdom of God.

Until we learn to abide in God's holy presence, we will feel as if we are in exile. The powers of this world will come crushing in on us and we will feel overwhelmed. It does happen to every one of us and yet, if we can take the time to slow down and dwell in the presence of our High God, we will discover what it means to become partakers of the divine nature. The most important thing we can do as Christians is to be unified with Christ, and thereby participate in Christ's kingdom work. All of the work of ministering and doing the work of the church means nothing if we are doing it on our own, and not by abiding in Christ. Learning to abide requires intentionality. It means that we block time out of our busy schedule to pray and spend time in the word. We dig deep into knowing Christ so that our preaching comes, not from a manuscript we found on the internet, but from the depths of the heart of God. We know Christ and in doing so,

⁸ John 16:33. NIV

⁹ Smith, 10.

Christ's passions become our passions and the sacred space in which we abide leads us back out into the world.

It is in this sacred space that God's pilgrims are transformed -- getting to share in the very heart of God and results in reflecting Christ and his kingdom. We are called to be "mirrors of God back to God, in Christ by the Holy Spirit."¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus said, "Let us become like Christ, since Christ became like us... He assumed the worst that he might give us the better; he became poor that we through his poverty might be rich; he took upon himself the form of a servant that we might be exalted; he was tempted that we might conquer; ... Let us give all, offer all, to him who gave himself a ransom and reconciliation for us."¹¹ As partakers of this divine nature we become more like Christ, which means we too become poor; we too take on the form of a servant; we too are tempted – but this is not exile. Instead, this is kingdom life in which we live and move in the sacred space of knowing Christ.

Neither exile, nor loss of political power, nor marginalization, nor persecution... can separate us from abiding in holy love as we become partakers of the divine nature. And nothing in this world can keep us from overflowing with that holy love. Vladimir Lossky reminds us, "In love directed towards God each human person finds his [or her] perfection; nevertheless, individual persons cannot arrive at perfection without the realization of fundamental unity of human nature. Love of God is necessarily bound up with love of one's fellow-man."¹² This becomes "the language of ... the *sacramental* life of the church community."¹³ We become willing participants in suffering for the sake of the kingdom and love of other. Jesus who was wounded for you and for me, asks us to become wounded with him.

That's the value of the metaphor of exile, for if we find ourselves in pain and wounded for the sake of the gospel, then we are participating with Christ -- the resurrected Christ who bore in his flesh the wounds of our salvation. Christ anoints the wounds that we bear for the sake of the gospel with the balm of holy love. It is in the place of our vulnerability that the holy love of God can fill us and spill out of us in a way that will touch and transform our world.

Tim and Shawna reminded us, "Mysteriously and wonderfully, the open wound in the body of Christ is the place from which the healing of salve-ation is offered to creation."¹⁴ And this is our sacramental life, lived as pilgrims in that sacred space. It is here that water and blood become the fluids of sacramental life. "In baptism and Eucharist, water and blood spill once again from Christ's body, and the place from which they flow is also the place where the world is invited to

¹⁰ Myk Habets, "Reforming Theosis," in Finlan and Kharlamov ed. *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Pickwick Publications, Eugene, OR, 2006, 161.

¹¹ Gregory Nazianzus, *Or.* 1.5

¹² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. James Clarke & Co, Cambridge & London, 1957, 214-215.

¹³ Robert Puchniak, "Augustine's Conception of Deification, Revisited," in Finlan and Kharlamov ed. *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Pickwick Publications, Eugene, OR, 2006, 132.

¹⁴ Gaines, 12.

enter into belief, to know the way, the truth, and the life.”¹⁵

As we close this conference and reflect upon the robust conversations that have brought us to this place, we will leave by celebrating the Eucharist. We will be led to the table. As we respond to the invitation, may we remember that we are God’s pilgrim people, participating with Christ in his mission in the world. We come with our inability to fully or consistently trust and obey God, not always comprehending the space in which we find ourselves, and yet, we are seekers of the way, the truth, and the life. Partaking of the elements, we become partakers of the divine nature and sojourners in the kingdom, pilgrims abiding in a sacred space. Let us make the next step of our journey as pilgrims, and come to the table.

¹⁵ Gaines, 13.