

1 Peter 2:2-10    John 14:1-14    “God’s People!”    May 18, 2014

*Children’s: a compass shows us the North pole... God made us with a sort of inner “GPS,” that points us towards God and tells us that we belong to God, who loves us no matter what!*

In the Gospel of John, Jesus reassured his disciples shortly before he died: “Greater works than these of mine shall you do, because I go to the Father,” and he encouraged them to see that even though he would die, the relationship and care he had with and for them would continue; and in fact, it would strengthen them to accomplish more as God’s people.

In his first letter to Peter, the apostle Paul tried to encourage the struggling early believers : "Like newborn infants long for milk for their sustenance, so too you ought to long for the pure, spiritual milk that will enable you to grow into salvation. Come to a living stone.... Precious to you who believe; but a stumbling block for those who have not experienced God in their lives. 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...' “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people!” Throughout the Bible, people are challenged to take seriously the relationship God offers: for us to be “God’s people.”

The challenge for the church is to believe in God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. Nothing else, no pastor, no program, no intellectual wire-walking, will lead us to salvation. Only our relationship with the God who gave us life in the first place will lead us to salvation. Salvation now, and salvation after death. Through his love lived out in Jesus Christ, God is the one who will bring this about, even when we falter and - as two of Jesus’ disciples did in the gospel reading today - have questions and uncertainty about what we are doing.

In Peter's letter, he told the people what it meant for them to have Christ as their cornerstone: "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 are living in a world that is not so big on offering mercy, and in a society that too often acts as though it is not very concerned about God.

Mercy. It has been told that a mother once approached the emperor Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and that justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

(Luis Palau, "Experiencing God's Forgiveness," Multnomah Press, 1984)

Mercy is something totally undeserved, absolutely not earned. That’s what we who sit here today

are offered. We may be pretty decent citizens. We probably pay our taxes and don't hold up convenience stores, and hopefully we try to be reasonable neighbors and good workers and cooperative students. Even so, each of us has done or said things that we wish we had not... Each of us has things about which we are ashamed. And each of us knows, deep down, that we come up short when it comes to really "loving God and loving neighbor" the way the Gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to. Lots of times we don't even want to be bothered!

Deep inside, most of us know that we have not done such a great job of pleasing God with the way we have used our lives. But it is precisely here, right in the face of our insufficiency and less than faithful discipleship, that we are given Jesus. "Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Jesus came to bring salvation and God's amazing mercy/grace to those who so not deserve it. Even us!

And then Jesus asks us to do something remarkable: to share this same mercy with *others* who do not deserve it!! Only through this can we discover the power and challenge of being "God's people," for in this we are called to do what our Lord has done: to offer forgiveness in the face of terrible acts of hatred, to offer friendship to those who act like our enemies, and to offer a place to belong to those who have trouble fitting in anywhere. "Greater works than these shall you do," Jesus promised.

"Once you were no people, but now you are God's people." This is true, even when God seems far away, even when WE feel far away from God. The Bible offers us some live-ably good news: God does not "undo" the identity we have received through Jesus even when we lose sight of it.

Years ago, in their book, *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon described a Caucasian minister's reaction to worship in a congregation of inner-city African Americans who gathered for LONG worship services, more than two hours on Sundays.

The guest preacher asked the pastor of the church, "Why do your people stay in church for so long?"

The local pastor explained, "Unemployment runs nearly 50% here, even higher for our youth. During the week, everywhere they go, everything they see, everything they hear tells them, 'You are a failure. You are nobody. You are a nothing, because you don't have a good job, or a fine car, or money.'"

So I have to get them in here once a week to get their heads straight. I get them together and through the hymns, the prayers, and the preaching, say, 'That's a lie! You *are* somebody! You are royalty! You are God's Chosen People.' It takes me so long to get them straight because the world perverts them so terribly." (*Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, adapted)

How about with US? Have our lives pressed in on us so that we cannot hear God's gracious promises to us? How have we lost our sense of ourselves as God's people? Has our inner "GPS" (possibilities: God's Person for Sure, or God-Protected Servant, or God-Powered Steps, or God-Pleasing Servant??) become unable to point us in the right direction, to show us that we really belong to God?? Do we go through life knowing that we belong to God, and trusting that God is with us; or do we skitter here and there, listening more to the brief accolades and enticements of a passing society, forgetting that God is our God, and that God has called us to be

the church in this world?

Each of us has been given life, various gifts, and a certain amount of time to live. We deal with kind people and mean people. We have successes and failures. Earthquakes and floods and forest fires and storms of physical and emotional nature will occur. The world will try to sell us all sorts of prescriptions and solutions for happiness and well-being. None of these things will finally feed us or lead us into life everlasting. Only God can accomplish that. God's promises are firm; they are the cornerstone on which life can be built. God will see you through any day and every thing. God's promises will tell you who you are in God's sight. God's Word will lead you through all of life and all of death. "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people!" May the One who claims us, who has given us life and who even right now offers us identity, lead us forward, that by God's mercy we may do great things as we share the peace and love of Jesus Christ in this world! Amen.