

Alien Living
I Peter 2:11-17

Aliens. For most of us, that word makes us think of characters that have strange things coming out of their orifaces or have the ability to transform into something very strange looking. The movie Aliens directed by James Cameron in 1986 made this term a centerpiece of science fiction. And since that time the development of alien characters has mushroomed! If you Google Aliens you will get well over 592 million hits. I'd say our world has an obsession with the otherworldly. Maybe it is because life here on earth has become so strange in itself!

When Peter said "*I urge you as aliens and exiles...*" he was not talking about creatures from outer space - or otherworldly science fiction beings. He was talking about the community of faith - those who hold a specific set of beliefs that set them apart from accepted society. Throughout scripture aliens refer to people from a different country, family, or culture. In the book of Genesis Abraham used this term when asking the Hittites for land to bury his wife Sarah - He said "*I am a stranger and an alien residing among you.*" If Abraham is an alien so are we! From the beginning of the biblical story the people of God - God's holy people - have been aliens - people set apart as different from the world around them.

In the same way Christians in the first and second century were different from those around them. They lived under Roman rule. But they had been called out *as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people* for God's purpose. And that meant they were to live a different life.

I Peter was written to new Christians just learning what it meant to be aliens. Most scholars believe that Peter was writing to communities of converts from paganism. They were probably

Gentiles who had made very conscious decisions to leave the ways of the world - in many cases friends and family - for the new life of following Jesus Christ. They had no rights or privileges as we have. They were visiting foreigners in a world of non-Christians. They could be forced out at any time for rebellious behavior. When we look at some of our own immigration laws today we can understand the fear and difficult world they lived in for many experience that today.

Thirty years ago two Christian theologians wrote a book called Resident Aliens and then followed with a sequel Where Resident Aliens Live. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon identified what we now know to be true. As Christians we are aliens living in a world that has changed around us. They note that “alien is a central self-understanding of Christians from the second century forward.” It was the chief metaphor employed by I Peter to describe a Christian’s relationship to the surrounding social order. In both these books Hauerwas and Willimon talk about the importance of the community -the colony - for the formation of Christians. They challenge the church to rethink what it means to be Christian - something we are still having to do today. So think with me today about what it means for us to be aliens - Christian aliens - living in the United States of America in the twenty-first century especially in the midst of a pandemic.

We begin the journey of alien living by making a conscious choice - a decision to claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Foundational to our faith is claiming the promises of God for ourselves. It is why we believe membership in the community of faith is important. Making that decision to join is crucial. We do not just gather as a club or a group of people who like each other. We come together because Jesus Christ has laid a claim on us and we have made a decision to put him at the center of our lives. We are fortunate that by living in America we have the freedom to make this choice without persecution. But from the moment we take on the identity as a Christian we are set apart as different by the world.

Gary Smalley was a noted author, who traveled extensively throughout the world conducting marriage and family seminars before his death in 2016. For one particular television special, he borrowed a friend's Stradivarius violin to use as an illustration. His friend had the violin flown in - complete with its own security guard! During the seminar, while teaching on value and honor, Mr. Smalley held up the violin for the audience to observe, without revealing its true nature. It was old and scratched up, with no strings, so it didn't look particularly impressive.

As he held it up, he noticed that the audience's response was minimal. He said, My holding up the violin didn't produce even one 'ah-h-h-' gasp in the entire crowd. After all, they could see with their own eyes that it was an old violin.

Then he began to explain that this was not just any old violin that he was holding. He told how there were only a few of them left in the world, and it was valued at that time at \$65,000. He then showed the audience the tiny inscription that said Stradivarius. He continued, A spontaneous, collective, breath-catching 'ah-h-h-h' reflex rifled throughout the crowd. Just a few moments before, it was just an old violin, not worthy of any special honor, but by attaching that word 'Stradivarius' to it, it suddenly was given a high place of honor by everyone in the room.

(Max Davis, *Never Stick Your Tongue out At Mama* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1997), 119.)

Friends, when we claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we take on the name of Christian. And that name reveals the one who deserves honor and glory. Therefore we are *to conduct ourselves honorably* because through our actions Jesus Christ is revealed to others. That is what Peter was saying - the purpose of following Jesus and acting a certain way was so that others might *see your honorable deeds and glorify God*.

Once we have made this conscious choice we come to understand that we are to live by a certain code of conduct. This code is infused with integrity. Peter was calling the people to a life

that showed by their good behavior and domestic order that they were not dangerous - maybe strange and different - but not dangerous or a threat to the social order. Therefore, he encouraged them to accept the authority of human institutions - even the Emperor.

We live in a world even more skeptical of institutions than they were in the first century so these words make us wonder. But here again we must remember that what Peter was saying was that we were to honor everyone and that included the Emperor. Note that the only one we are to fear or stand in awe of is God. No one is to press the principle of Christian freedom to the point of indulging in behavior that hurts the community, dishonors God and contradicts our identity as God's servants.

In Hauerwas and Willimon's second book Where Resident Aliens Live they use - interestingly enough - the Marine Corp to talk about the conduct of Christians. They quote a 1995 article from The Wall Street Journal about the family values instilled in Marines and how those values impact the way they see society. The article noted that Parris Island is "Where the Difference Begins."...and it begins with cultural indoctrination. At Parris Island, recruits learn the Marine way of talking, walking, and thinking. Every waking moment will remind them they have left a culture of self-gratification and entered a culture of self-discipline. Pleasure is suspect and sacrifice is good. The recruits are denied all the basic diversions of the typical American youth - television, cigarettes, cars, candy, soft-drinks, video games, music, alcohol, drugs and sex. (p. 74-78) I remember my husband Bill talking about this experience when he entered the Marine Corp as a young 18 year old recruit.

Hauerwas and Willimon note that what happens to the new recruits can be summed up this way - "They put them in a group, they moved them through a perilous ordeal, they taught them a new language, they gave them skills to analyze what was wrong with their former lives." And what happens, the world gets nervous that these young Marines might be a threat to the old way of life. In the book they note that this is similar to baptism for Christians. When we take on the new way of life

as Christians we too are called to live by a new code of conduct. We are to learn how to talk, walk and think as Christ did.

Tomorrow as a nation we will celebrate Memorial Day - a day when we remember all those who have died in our nation's service. What I am told by those who served in our armed forces is that their experience was where they learned discipline, honor, courage and what commitment meant. They were taught a way of life that values their fellow soldiers. For them to survive they must depend on others. They must trust that others will go with them wherever they are called and do everything to protect them. Even to their death. The Marine corp motto is: Semper Fi - Always Faithful. Alien Living calls us to live under a code of conduct that is different from the world around us. We are to be faithful to Jesus Christ - living honorably - honoring everyone, loving the family of believers, honoring the leaders but fearing God and only God.

Living by this code of conduct leads to a life-style that is different from the lifestyle of the rest of the world. For a Christian life-style **is** other centered and not self-centered. And that life-style draws others to us. The way we live our lives is the most pervasive witness we have of the power of Jesus Christ to transform us. One of the problems for us as Christians today is that so many who call themselves Christians do not live honorably, do not live by a Christian code of conduct and have not been a positive witness for Christ. It has always been a challenge for the covenant community. And you know why this is true? Because it takes commitment and focus. It takes practice, drills, discipline. It takes a love that is willing to sacrifice the ways of society for the ways of Jesus. It requires us to be willing to give everything for Christ as he did for us. And that is hard work my friends.

In the aftermath of World War II, a husband and wife were getting ready to go to a memorial service for the son of friends of theirs. The man had been killed in the service. His family was

dedicating a window in their church to this young man who had lost his life. The window cost \$50,000.

What a beautiful thing to do in honor of their son, the wife said to her husband. Suddenly, she turned around with an ashen look on her face and said, What are we going to give?

What are you talking about? her husband said. We don't need to give anything. Our son came back alive and safe.

That's exactly what I mean, she pressed. Our friends lost their son, and they are giving \$50,000. We got our son back, and we are not giving anything?

Friends, as we celebrate Memorial Day tomorrow may we remember all those who gave their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters for us. It was a sacrifice that should make us pause and think. What are we willing to give in gratitude for their sacrifice?

Friends, we are living in a time when we are being asked to sacrifice our freedom to move around freely to save others. We are being asked to think of others first and to care for others more than our own freedoms. Others like the health care workers, first responders, the essential workers are sacrificing their lives every day for us. As Christians we are called to a life of sacrifice - a life of faithfulness, love and grace that gives to others.

So the question for us today and every day needs to be - What are we going to give?