Sunday, May 5, 1996
RESIDENT ALIENS
I Peter 2:2-10

The title of today's sermon, Resident Aliens, is also the title of a book first published in 1989 by Abingdon Press, written by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. In it, the authors claim that the best way to describe the Christian Church in the United States today is as a community of "resident aliens."

They put it this way: "The church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another. In baptism, our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens."

The authors go on to claim that sometime between 1960 and 1980, especially in the United States, an old, inadequately conceived idea of the church in the world ended, and a better one is awaiting recognition.

How can this dramatic change be illustrated? One of the authors uses his hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, as a personal example. Here's how he describes it:

One Sunday evening in 1963, in Greenville, the Fox Movie Theater, in defiance of the state's time-honored blue laws, opened its doors on a Sunday. Seven young people, the author included, all regular attendees of the Methodist Youth Fellowship, made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the movie theater.

That evening, according to the author, marked a turning point for the church, at least in South Carolina. On that night, Greenville, one of the last pockets of resistance to secularity in the Western world, served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes or free rides for the church. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the worldview for the young, and that night, in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.

The point, the authors say, is that their parents had never worried about whether their children would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the whole town shut down. You couldn't even buy a gallon of gas. There was a traffic jam on Sunday mornings at 9:45 as everyone headed to their respective Sunday schools. People saw a world that looked good and right, despite the fact that it was racially segregated.

Many believed that people became Christian simply by being lucky enough to be born in places like Greenville, South Carolina, or similar towns.

Whether or not those who called themselves Christians were ever justified in believing this, it's certainly not true today. Some people may still think that electing a few so-called "Christians" to political office, passing a few new laws, or reintroducing prayer in public schools will somehow create a "Christian" culture. But that's not the case. Many Christians are waking up and realizing that it is no longer "our world," and it never truly was.

And that's good news, not bad. We now have an opportunity to rediscover the truth — that the church, made up of those called by God, embodies a way of living in the world that the world cannot know on its own terms.

Furthermore, before the Fox Theater opened on Sundays, things weren't really any better. There has been no golden age for Christians in this country or any other. We may have deceived ourselves into thinking we were in charge, that we had created a Christian culture, but that was never the case.

The decline of the notion that the church needs some sort of surrounding "Christian" culture to prop it up is not something to lament; it's something to celebrate. Now we have the opportunity to be faithful in a way that makes being a Christian today an exciting adventure.

Think of the opportunity! For me, it's thrilling to hear young parents tell their children, "Such behavior might be fine for others, but not for you. You are special. You are different. You have a different story. You have different values. You are a Christian." That's what the writer of 1 Peter was saying in today's scripture reading: "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."

Although it's exciting, it's not easy. If you're parents who are part of the Christian community, you have to ask tough questions, like: How many toys does your 5-year-old need? How much money needs to be spent on your 11-year-old's birthday party? How many sports and hobbies must your 14-year-old be fully outfitted for? And how important is it that your child plays soccer or takes tennis lessons on a Sunday instead of being in church with the family?

These are tough questions in a culture that emphasizes more and more as the path to happiness. It's not easy being a resident alien in a consumer-oriented culture.

In fact, the more prosperous we become, the harder the temptations are. In nearly 40 years of ministry, I've had many people come to me in desperate need, seeking God's help. But rarely have I had someone come to me and say, "I'm living the good life, I'm making more money than I ever thought I would, and I need the church and God's help to deal with my good fortune. Even though I have enough, I never think I have enough, and I've discovered that the more I make, the harder it is for me to give any of it away."

Maybe that's partly my fault. One minister I respect wrote: "Most any pastor can help people in times of need. It doesn't take a skillful minister to comfort someone in the hospital. The greatest test of ministry comes when people aren't down, desperate, or at the end of their rope. It takes a real pastor to visit someone who's just been promoted and say, 'I know this promotion puts you in a vulnerable position spiritually. Could we pray?'"

Even though we are resident aliens in our consumer culture, when life is good, we often think that faith has little to offer. We think we can handle our good fortune on our own.

Statistics show that in prosperous times, church attendance drops, while it rises in bad times. Similarly, during economic booms, people give less of their income to the church, while in times of recession, they give more.

When things are going well, we tend to put our faith on the sidelines. It becomes something we do when there's nothing else on the agenda. But it's precisely then, as resident aliens, that we encounter several dangers.

One danger is that we may live in a fool's paradise, believing that good fortune is ours because we're somehow better than others or more blessed by God.

Another danger is that we forget Jesus' words: "To whom much is given, much is required."

The third danger is that prosperity without discipline can cause us to lose our souls. Jesus said, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose their soul?" Prosperity without discipline leads to moral flabbiness. In our secular, materialistic civilization, we are tempted to believe that the easy way is the right way. We are lured by "easy credit," "easy payments," and a constant avoidance of delayed gratification.

Don't misunderstand — Jesus never taught that we shouldn't work to improve our standard of living or help others improve theirs. He did, however, teach that simply having more won't bring happiness or meaning to life.

That's why the increasing obsession with winning big through the lottery bothers me. Last week I read that the number one "peak experience" sought by Americans isn't a lasting relationship, meaningful work, or raising a family — it's winning the lottery.

Three out of four Americans have bought lottery tickets. In 1994 alone, 100 million people bought $30 billion worth of tickets in the hopes of striking it rich. Yet, of all the millions of tickets sold, only 173 millionaires have been created in 12 years.

Are these winners truly happy? A study in Illinois found that lottery winners were actually the least happy group of people. In most cases, their lives were ruined.

Psychologist David G. Meyers, in his book The Pursuit of Happiness: Who is Happy and Why, concluded that happiness isn't found in money, possessions, education, or age. Instead, it's found in disciplined lifestyles, committed relationships, and the practice of integrity.

Even though we know this, we struggle to live it. That's why being part of a church community is so important. Living the life of a resident alien is not something we can do alone. The Christian faith is not a private affair. The New Testament portrays the Christian as part of a new family — a congregation.

To live as resident aliens in a world where our Christian values are constantly threatened isn't easy. That's why we need the church. We need to be part of a community that reminds us of God's purpose and presence in our lives, a community that increases the love of God and neighbor. Amen.