Sunday May 5, 1996

RESIDENT ALIENS I Peter 2:2-10

The title of the sermon, RESIDENT ALIENS, is also the title of a book first published in 1989 by Abingdon. Its authors, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon claim that the best way to describe the Christian Church in the United States today is that of a community of "resident aliens."

Here's the way they put it. "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."

These two authors go on to claim that sometime

between 1960 and 1980, especially in this country, 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, was open on a Sunday. Seven young people, the author one of them, all regular attenders 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 this author, represents a turning point for the church, South Carolina style. 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 for the church, no more free rides. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.

The point is, according to the authors, their parents had never worried about whether they would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. One could not even buy a gallon of gas. There was a traffic jam on Sunday mornings at 9:45,

when all went to their respective Sunday schools. By overlooking much that was wrong in that world--it was a racially segregated world, remember--people saw a world that looked good and right.

It was believed by many that people became Christian simply by being lucky enough to be born in places like Greenville, South Carolina or some other similar town.

Whether or not those who call themselves Christian were ever justified in believing this about the world and the Christian faith, it's not true today. There probably are some people who continue to believe that by electing a few so-called "Christians" to political office and by passing a few new laws and by having prayer in public schools we

can create a "Christian" culture. But such is not the case. All sorts of Christians are waking up and realizing that it is no longer "our world," and it never was.

And that's good news, not bad news. We have an opportunity to rediscover what has been and always is the case, that the church, made up of those called out 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 were not really any better. There has been no golden age for Christians in the past in this country or in any other. We could perhaps deceive ourselves into thinking we were in charge, that we had created a Christian culture

but such was never the case.

Thus the decline of the notion that the church needs some sort of surrounding "Christian" culture to prop it up and mold its young is not a death to lament. It is 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 a thrill to hear young parents say to 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 a different set of values. You are a Christian." That's what the writer of I Peter was saying in the scripture reading today. "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 exiting, it's not easy. For example, if you are parents who claim to be a part of the Christian community we call the church, you have to ask such questions as: how big a collection of Power-Rangers does your 5 year old need? How many super Nintendo cartridges does it take to satisfy your 9 year old? How much money must really be spent on entertainment at your 11 year old's birthday party? How many sports and hobbies must you fully outfit your 14 year old for? How important is it that a new car be in the driveway on the day your 16 year old gets a driver's license?

How important is it for your child to be in a soc-

cer league on a Sunday or take tennis lessons or do something else rather than be in church with the family?

These are tough questions to be faced in a culture that emphasizes getting more and more in order to find happiness and that teaches that more is good and less is bad. It's not always easy being a resident alien in a consumer oriented culture.

In fact the more prosperous one becomes, the more difficult the temptations. During my almost 40 years of ministry many people have come to me at one time or another, as they have to all ministers of all churches and said something like this: "I am in desperate trouble and I need the help of God." The troubles have been of every

kind. However, rarely in these 40 years has someone come to me and said, "I am living the good life, I'm making more money than I ever thought I would. I need the help of the church and of God to be able to deal with my good fortune. Even though I have enough I never think I have enough and I've discovered the more money I make, the more I want and the more difficulty I have in giving any of it away."

Now maybe it's partly my fault. In one of the professional journals I receive, another minister, a man I respect very much recently wrote: "Most any pastor can help people in times of need. It doesn't take a skillful minister to visit someone in the hospital and be comforting. Moments when people are down and desperate are not the greatest tests of ministry. The greatest tests are those

times when people are not down, desperate, or at the end of their rope."

"It takes a real pastor to go into a family where someone has just been promoted to the presidency of the local bank and say, "Mary, I've just gotten the news of your promotion. So I rushed over, knowing that this promotion is placing you in an extremely vulnerable position as far as your soul is concerned. Could we pray?"

Even though as Christians we are resident aliens, in our kind of consumer culture, when life is good, we think that the Christian faith has little to say to us. We don't need the help of God or the church community to handle our good fortune. We can handle it quite well ourselves, thank you.

Statistically, it has been well documented over the years that in good times in a country like ours, church attendance tends to drop, whereas in bad times, it rises. Along the same line, in the most prosperous economic times, people give a smaller proportion of their income to church and in times of economic recession or depression, they give a larger proportion of their incomes.

It's also well documented that on the whole, those who have the highest incomes in our country, gives the lowest percentage of their income to the church and other charitable organizations, while those who have the lowest incomes give the highest percentage.

It's also true that most of us, when things are going quite well for us, tend to put our Christian

faith on the sidelines. It becomes another leisure time activity, something else we do when we have nothing else on the agenda. But it is precisely then that as resident aliens we encounter several dangers.

One danger is that we can be living in a fool's paradise because it's so easy to believe that good fortune is ours because we are better than others and more blessed by God.

Another danger when things are going well for us and we have more than we need is that we tend to forget that Jesus said, "the more you have the more it is that is required of you."

The third danger is that prosperity without discipline can cause us to lose our souls. Jesus said,

"What does it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?" As resident aliens, having too much can cause moral flabbiness. Day after day in this secular civilization with all of its exaggerated emphasis on image, materialism and consuming, we are tempted more and more to believe that the easy way is the right way. We are lured by invitations of "easy" credit, "easy" payments. Easy, easy easy. Deferred gratification is considered bad.

Lest you misunderstand, Jesus never taught that we should not work to improve our standard of living or the standard of living of others or do our best to fulfill our potential. He did teach however that simply having more will not automatically bring us happiness or help us find meaning in life.

That's what bothers me about the increasing obsession of many people with winning big money by buying lottery tickets. Last week I read somewhere that the number one peak experience now sought by Americans is not being in a lasting, loving relationship, or having a job that brings satisfaction, or making and keeping commitments, or raising a responsible family; it's winning the lottery.

One study maintains that three out of four Americans have bought lottery tickets. One hundred million people in 36 states and the District of Columbia bought 30 billion dollars worth of tickets in 1994 to prove our love affair with the lottery. Yet only 173 millionaires have been created in 12 years from the lottery.

Do these big winners get a dream-come-true? An Illinois study developed a method of determining "general happiness" and using this method they studied three groups of people, those who won lotteries, those who were victims of accidents and those who had nothing extreme happen to them. The least happy? The lottery winners. Most of their lives have been ruined.

The lottery has become such a pervasive presence in our culture that one pastor with a sense of humor suggested a new kind of church-offering lottery. There are three simple steps:

1. When the ushers bring down the offering plates, the entire offering is then dumped into one big offering plate.

2. One usher then reaches in and draws out one offering envelope or check.

3. The donor of the "winning" offering envelope or check receives double his or her money back.

A psychologist, David G. Meyers, in his book THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: WHO IS HAPPY AND WHY, studied that issue and came to several conclusions which should not be surprising to those of us who are resident aliens. The things that enable you to be happy are not how much money you make, or how many possessions you own, or whether you are highly educated, or whether you are old or young.

Rather, happiness or well-being is found in the

renewal of disciplined life styles which includes practicing delayed gratification, committed relationships and the receiving and giving of acceptance. To experience deep well-being is to be self-confident, yet unself-conscious, self-giving yet self- respecting, realistic yet hope-filled. In addition having and practicing integrity is more important than high self- esteem. Even though we all know this, we still have difficulty in living it.

And that's why being an active member of a church congregation is so important. It's difficult to live the life of a resident alien all alone. Living the Christian faith is not a private affair. To be a Christian is more than having an emotional attachment to Jesus. It is more than having Jesus as one's personal savior. The New Testament depicts the Christian as one within a new kind of

family of God, a household, a congregation.

To live as resident aliens in a world where our central Christian values are always in danger of being eroded by the world around us is not easy. That's why the church is so important. We need to be part of a community of forgiveness which continually undergirds us and reminds us of God's purpose for us and God's presence in our lives and in the world--a community which has as its purpose the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. Amen.