

Bible Study on 1 Peter 2:9-10

The 13th World Assembly of
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“But you are a chosen race, the King’s priests, a holy nation, God’s own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light. At one time, you were not God’s people, but now you are his people; at one time you did not know God’s mercy, but now you have received his mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

[Song: “You Are the Seed” UM Hymnal #583, v. 1]

You are the seed that will grow a new sprout;
you’re a star that will shine in the night;
you are the yeast and a small grain of salt,
A bea-con to glow in the dark.

You are the dawn that will bring a new day;
You’re the wheat that will bear gold-en grain.
You are a sting and a soft, gen-tle touch,
my wit-ness-es where-v’er you go.

Go, my friends, go to the world, pro-claim-ing love to all,
Mes-sen-gers of my for-giv-ing peace, e-ternal love.
Be, my friends, a loy-al wit-ness, from the dead I a-rose;
“Lo, I’ll be with you for-ever, till the end of the world.”

[Opening Prayer]

“Prayer of St. Francis Assisi”

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master,
 grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved as to love;
 For it is in giving that we receive;
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.”

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I am sure that most of you are familiar with the scripture for this Bible Study from which the theme of our assembly came: **“Chosen People: Called to Proclaim.”** The words remain a source of great comfort to Christians now as they did back in the early days of our faith when they were first written. These are words of assurance, giving believers a sense of belonging.

The original audience to whom the writing was addressed were sorely needing such words of support and encouragement. While we cannot be certain whether it was truly the apostle Peter, or someone writing in his name who authored this epistle, what is clear is that the recipients of First Peter were facing “various trials” that were testing their faith. These Christians residing in Asia Minor, or what is now northern Turkey, were being encouraged to hold steady and grow into their faith, even in the face of great religious persecution.

You see, the pioneers of the Christian faith were forced to live the life of an outsider. This was both on an informal level, as a maligned group facing social ostracization for their actions and beliefs, and on a formal level, as an officially persecuted religious sect. State persecution in the first century had led to the exile and scattering of Jesus’ first followers from Jerusalem, spreading the Gospel across the far-reaches of the Roman Empire. Persecution of Christians came in waves in those early days, and clearly, the audience to whom First Peter was addressed in Asia Minor were facing renewed challenges to their faith.

In the beginning of First Peter, the recipients of the letter are named as “those who reside as aliens” according to New American Standard Bible; “those temporarily residing abroad” according to the New English Translation; “people who are temporary residents in the world” according to the Names of God Bible and God’s Word Translation; and “people living as aliens scattered among the unbelievers” according to The Voice translation.

Whether they were literally foreigners who were living in exile or a group of people who were alienated from their society for their beliefs and conduct, these pioneers of the Christian faith were living lives as outsiders. This outsider-status was not limited to Christians residing in Asia Minor. Many of the first century Christian believers were actual aliens, foreigners in the legal sense. And beyond their legal status, first-century Christians always thought of themselves as set apart from the world. This is captured in Philippians 3:20, where Paul proclaims, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."

For Christians of the apostle Paul and Peter's era, their status as the "chosen people" of God soothed the pain of being outsiders in a society that demanded conformity to pagan and idol worship. It was a paradox -- God's holy nation and royal priesthood were called to endure a life of humiliation and suffering. Embracing freedom meant willingly becoming servants of God. Believers were called to honor the very people and institutions that were persecuting them, unjustly bearing pain by following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. That's particularly difficult, isn't it? To return love and kindness, to live in righteousness, even toward those who would do you wrong? We are to be fools for Christ. Because when we are "reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly" as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. (1 Corinthians 4:10-13). For these Christian insiders -- a motley crew of people who had received the grace, love, and mercy of God into their lives and had been totally transformed -- the call was to embrace the status of an outsider in their dealings with the world. It was to willingly abandon their striving for acceptance by the world's standards.

And, how were they to do this? It was by ridding themselves of aspects of their lives that promoted self-centeredness, such as "malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander" (1 Peter. 2:1). It was by letting go of the very things that we cling to so dearly in our lives-- the material, temporal things that too often define who we are. When we surrender to God's will, becoming "like living stones" (1 Peter 2:5) for God's sake, we take our rightful place in the spiritual house that is being built around us as we speak. We become like flames that flicker and dance to the same movement of the Spirit that animated the lives of these early Christians. The challenge remains the same for us as it did for them: having been awakened and called out of the darkness, how do we continue walking in the light?

As I was preparing to lead this bible study, I could not help but recall my experience as an outsider, a stranger in a foreign land. The country of my citizenship is the United States of America, but this has not always been the case. As you can probably tell from

my name and slight accent, I am not an American citizen by birth. My homeland is South Korea. It is where I was born, where I completed my schooling through college, and where I was married and gave birth to my two children. In fact, it was not until I was 31 years-old, in 1989, that I moved to the United States. I was joining my husband, who had left Korea 6 months prior, to attend graduate school. For the first few years, my identity in America was as a visitor, the spouse of a foreign student. It was not until several years later that I and the rest of my family gained green cards and became Resident Aliens.

From a legal standpoint, an alien is a person who resides within the borders of a country but is not a member of that country. A “resident alien” is someone who has authorization to live in a foreign country either permanently or temporarily. As some of you who have experienced the challenges of the US immigration system surely can relate to, gaining legal status was such a relief! Going from the foreign student status and the spouse of a foreign student status to resident alien status meant that my family and I no longer had to fear the possibility of deportation. With this new status, I could also freely live and work in the United States.

Yet, despite all the rights and benefits provided by my new legal status, I remember not liking the label of “a resident alien,” particularly the last word, “alien.” I had always thought the word, “alien” belonged to someone from a different planet, like E.T. in the sci-fi movie. Being categorized as an “alien” emphasized my place as an outsider, making concrete the invisible line of cultural differences that kept me at arm’s length from insiders.

An outsider can be perceived as a challenge to insiders. That was how the members of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee of my first church saw me when I became their new pastor. I still remember vividly the day I met them for the first time. At the end of the introduction meeting, the District Superintendent asked us all to go into the sanctuary for a moment of prayer. She asked me to kneel at the altar and everyone else stood around me in a circle with their hands on me as they prayed for me. While they went around the circle taking turns lifting up prayers on my behalf, I could not help but notice that there was one word which repeatedly appeared in everyone’s prayer. The word was “challenge”. Each prayer somehow incorporated the word: It was “O God, in this time of challenge....”, or “O God, as we face this challenge...”, or “O God, this is a challenge...”

While they were praying, I was thinking to myself, ‘Gee, what are you talking about? I’m the one who is facing the big challenge here, not you! I was thinking, “How am I going to

do ministry in English?” At that point, I really had very little knowledge about American culture. I didn’t even like American food! To be honest, when I thought about American food, all I could picture were hamburgers, hot dogs and pizza. Prior to the meeting, the fear running through my mind was what if, after discovering all of my limitations, the church would ask me to leave after serving just one year there?...’ But, ironically, as I kept hearing the word “challenge” being repeated in the prayers of the people whom I was going to serve, I began to feel rather relieved and less anxious about my own challenges in the cross-cultural, cross-racial appointment.

Well, by the grace and mercy of God, I served that church for 5 and a half years -- which was a longer stay than the normal first time appointment. The church was a so-called dying church. My predecessor, an Anglo-woman pastor, had told me with tears in her eyes that all her efforts to revive the church had failed. My District Superintendent had warned me to be ready for the prospect of having to close the church during my time there. In fact, it turned out the word “challenge” was the right word to use in that context. It was a really challenging situation!

You see, the church neighborhood was rapidly changing as white families were moving out, and Hispanic and Latino families taking their place. There were 5 other United Methodist churches in the town, which were all catering to anglo families except one, relatively new Hispanic congregation. My church was the only church that did not have a parking lot. The average worship attendance was between 35 and 40, with most attendees being elderly retirees. My volunteer secretary was in his 70’s, and the treasurer was in her 80’s. The church directory showed one family with young children, but I never had a chance to meet them because they had left the church when they heard that I was coming. Perhaps, I was too much of a stranger to them, an alien.

So can you imagine the difficulties a Korean immigrant, who was still struggling to communicate in English, who had just graduated from seminary, would be facing in trying to keep a dying church alive with a group of white retirees? Perhaps some of you in this room can. Perhaps you have faced similar hurdles in your ministry.

Despite all of the challenges we faced, we kept our doors open and paid our apportionments in full every year. The congregation showed me tremendous patience and understanding as I struggled through my first few years of preaching. Despite the congregation’s advanced age, they showed up for worship and Sunday school every week, even on days when the streets were covered with snow and ice. I will never forget the cold winter morning when Mr. Hagemann, a disabled man in his late 80’s came to church, walking with his two canes on the ice-covered sidewalk to get there!

They also taught me that no matter what age you are, you can embrace change. I will always remember how our weekly tutoring program for the underprivileged children in our neighborhood started. There was a neighborhood child whose name was Jaris. One day, I saw him and a few other boys throwing rocks at our church parsonage window. When I told them to freeze, of course they ran. And without thinking, I gave chase. I don't know what possessed me to do this. I was just caught up in the moment I guess. Well, they ended up running into a high-rise, public housing apartment complex and I followed them inside running right behind them.

By the time I got into the building, all of the boys were out of sight except Jaris. Being the youngest, he wasn't able to run away as quickly. I asked him where his parents were, and I realized that there were no caretakers around for him and his brother. As I surveyed the surroundings, I noticed that there was nothing to entertain the children living in the building - no indoor playroom or outdoor playground.

When I returned home, I could not get him out of my mind. My heart ached for him and the other children in the building. So, I decided to approach the church leaders with the idea to start a tutoring program for our neighbor children. I won't forget their reactions when I told them what I had done. They said, "Ouk-Yean! That was so dangerous! Don't you know who lives in that building?" But when I told them of what I witnessed, their hearts opened to the needs of the community of outsiders beyond our church walls.

So, our weekly tutoring program started, with my two children and two ladies in their 70's serving as volunteer tutors. Humble beginnings, I know. But, we continued to grow as word spread among the children from the high-rise building. Eventually, more volunteers came to help. And slowly, we had a packed church basement filled with kids and mostly elderly volunteer tutors. Our tutoring program even inspired a young man from our church to attend seminary! While serving as a youth group leader and helping with the weekly tutoring program, he discerned a call into ordained ministry. I am proud to tell you that he and his wife are new church planters in the Portland area. For an old and dying congregation, what God worked in our midst was truly a miracle.

I went to my first church as an alien, an outsider, a challenge to the insiders, and my legal status remained as a resident alien for the whole time I served there. But, instead of rejecting me, my congregation embraced me despite all my limitations. While worshipping and serving together, I grew in my understanding of American culture. Either my English skills improved, or people slowly got used to my accent. I grew in my

identity as a pastor, and my leadership skills became more developed. Truly, I am who I am today because of their acceptance, love, encouragement and support.

I would like to share with you a poem Sue Burman, one of the saints of the church wrote for me when she found out that I was leaving. It's titled, "Tribute to Ouk-Yean Kim Jueng."

She's God's beauty here on duty,
Bless this child so meek and mild.
A golden flower of Korean bower.
Give her room to grow and bloom.

She is preaching here without fear
Teaching there she is everywhere.

Are you sickly she'll come quickly,
Bring a prayer and sooth your care.
Treasured daughter shares the Water,
Bread and Wine, God's gift divine.

Too soon, she is gone prolific one
Mystic ion a dandelion.

I am sure that you could feel Sue Burman's love for me. These words of love that she spoke to me along with the other many displays of support shaped me during those years that I was her pastor. And they continue to feed my spirit even today as I remember her and my beloved first church. Their commitment to take on the "challenge" that I represented with love helped break down the distinction between insider and outsider that existed between us at the start of our relationship.

[Break for Small Group Discussion]

Questions: Have you ever found yourself as an outsider? How was that experience? How has it impacted your view of outsiders?

[Song: "You Are the Seed" UM Hymnal #583, v. 2]

You are the flame that will lighten the dark,
sending sparkles of hope, faith, and love;
You are the shepherds to lead the whole world

through valleys and pastures of peace.

You are the friends that I chose for myself,
the word that I want to proclaim.

You are the new kingdom built on a rock
where justice and truth always reign.

Go, my friends, go to the world, pro-claim-ing love to all,
mes-sen-gers of my for-giv-ing peace, e-ternal love.

Be, my friends, a loy-al wit-ness, from the dead I a-rose;
“Lo, I’ll be with you for-ever, till the end of the world.”

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To insiders, an alien can be perceived not only as an outsider but also as a threat.

Over 130 years ago, protestant church missionaries arrived in Korea with great missional zeal. About hundred years ahead of them were several Catholic missionaries who were all persecuted along with the initial Korean converts to Christianity. Due to such intense persecution, Christianity was almost non-existent in Korea when Protestant missionaries from America arrived. They were eager to meet the Korean people and reintroduce Christian faith to them. They encountered many common people suffering from poverty and wanted to help them.

But, their efforts to reach out to the locals were met with suspicion and doubt. Fear often led to them suffering mistreatment. At that time, most Koreans had not seen any foreigners other than those from China and Japan. So, the missionaries who looked completely different from them were not just strangers and outsiders but also serious threats. People called the missionaries “Western ghosts”. Rumors quickly spread that the Western ghosts would kidnap young children. In the midst of such distrust, the missionaries could not accomplish much for the first couple of years.

Sometimes, people call me a missionary from Korea. But, I do not feel qualified to be called by that label because I have never experienced such hostility in this country. Truly, in comparison to the hardships of the first missionaries to Korea, the difficulties I have experienced in my ministry seem hardly worth noting.

And how about the “aliens” of today’s world? With the sudden influx of hundred thousands of migrants and refugees into many of the European countries, aliens are now perceived as problems and threats by insiders. People are suspicious that terrorists are hiding among the aliens. They are worried that the aliens will bring down their

economy and disrupt the local culture. Earlier this summer, such perceptions helped push the majority of people in England to vote to leave the European Union in the so-called Brexit referendum.

How about aliens in America? Historically, America has been a haven for immigrants. The words “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”, which are at the footsteps of the Statue of Liberty come to mind. Unfortunately, such sentiments seem to have been forgotten or abandoned. After September 11, and with the recent rise in terrorism, aliens and resident aliens, even in some cases, U.S. citizens, who are from certain ethnic backgrounds or religious faiths are perceived not only as outsiders but also as threats to national security. Some Americans believe that we can protect our country from terrorist threats and attacks by building up walls on the border and enforcing stricter immigration laws and regulations. This is because to insiders, aliens can be perceived as threats.

Yet, in the scripture passage we have for today, and throughout the Gospels for that matter, we see that an alien or a resident alien was the identity of Christians in the first century. The pioneers of our faith lived the lives of outsiders by radically embracing love at the cost of even their lives. Such boldness was taken by the powers of their time to be threatening the social fabric of inequity and injustice.

But, time sure has a way of changing things, doesn't it? What began as a fringe movement has now become the world's most dominant religion. It says something when all of the presidential candidates in the most powerful country in the world pledge allegiance to a Judeo-Christian God. And with the changing of the times, Christians have stopped thinking of themselves as aliens in the world. Nowadays, unless you live in a place where you cannot practice your faith freely, you would not think of yourself as an alien because of your Christian faith. No one would perceive you as an outsider or a threat because you claim to be a Christian.

So, I was fascinated when I came across the concept of Christians living as Resident Aliens, a theme that is covered in the book, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, which was co-authored by theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. When it was published in 1989, the book sparked lively discussions and debates among Christians, especially pastors and church leaders, about Christian identity as well as the nature, mission and ministry of the church.

According to Hauerwas and Willimon, sometime between 1960 and 1980, the whole world changed drastically. Until then, Sunday in America was always church day. Local

laws prohibited commercial activity on Sundays, meaning that all stores, even movie theaters, were closed. And almost everyone went to church. Children never asked their parents if they could stay home instead of going to church. Perhaps some of you are thinking, what a golden age! However, during the period of two decades, one by one, the nation's leading retail chains began to open their stores on Sundays. And soon, Sunday shopping would become a normal way of life for Americans -- similar to how retailers are now beginning to open their doors on Thanksgiving Day!

In my opinion, the world did not change just during the period Willion and Hauerwas pointed to. If there is one constant about the world, it is that it's forever changing. Just look at how rapidly the business landscape has changed. The list of prominent companies that have disappeared is dizzying: Companies like Montgomery Ward, Circuit City, Compaq, MCI WorldCom, RCA, Tower Records, Oldsmobile, Lehman Brothers, BlockBuster, Borders, TWA, Pan Am, and Eastern Airlines are no longer operational. The life expectancy of a company in 1955 was 75 years, but in 2015, it is less than 15 years.

But, changes are not limited just to the business world. Think about the changes to the global environment. The average temperature of the earth has risen by 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit over the past century and shows no signs of stopping. With each passing month, a new record high in global average temperature is set. Glaciers are melting at an alarming speed, and sea levels are rising. As we have witnessed, climate change has resulted in severe weather patterns, causing both historic floods and droughts.

We have also seen technological change alter the lifestyle and social behavior of people all over the world. With globalization, there is more racial and religious diversity in the world. It is predicted that in the United States, ethnic minorities will comprise the majority of the total population by 2043. In my lifetime, we have already seen the population shift from rural to urban, resulting in bigger cities. And as I have touched upon earlier, global migratory trends are pointing upwards due to political and economic crises.

Changes are happening in the church, too. As the church is no longer the top priority in people's lives and denominational loyalty fades, mainline churches have struggled with membership loss and worship attendance decline. With the departure of their younger generation, churches are aging.

Yet, there are some positive changes occurring, as well: In the United Methodist Church, the number of women clergy continues to grow. The number of women bishops

is currently at 14. This year, 4 U.S. Jurisdictions elected 7 women bishops, and one of them is the denomination's first openly gay bishop, though our current church law prohibits the ordination of LGBTQ persons. Something unthinkable, something no one thought would be possible yet, has just happened in the life of the Methodist church. Truly, as Hauerwas and Willimon note in their book, "...an old, inadequately conceived world [has] ended, and a fresh, new world [begun]... A tired world has ended, and [an] exciting new one is awaiting recognition."

These theologians argue that, in this distinctly changed world, though Christians continue to think and act as if they are in charge, as if the old arrangements are still valid, a so-called Christian nation does not exist anywhere in the new world and that now all Christians should think of themselves as "resident aliens" in a foreign land. Like the Christians in the first century, today's Christian believers must live as aliens, people whose commonwealth is in heaven.

As we consider the challenges we face by adopting the Christian identity as an alien or a resident alien, Hauerwas and Willimon's argument might not sound attractive to our ears. It's not easy going against the grain. It's particularly difficult for those of us who enjoy insider status: whether it is in our places of work, circle of friends, and even our own family and churches.

Whenever I talk about forsaking one's privilege, I remember the confession my husband, Suk-Hwan made many years ago. It was when we both were in seminary and juggling our responsibilities as both students and young parents. Living in America, we were still a typical Korean couple of our generation. It meant that all the house chores were basically mine, despite the fact that we were equally busy students. Suk-Hwan would try to "help," but his "help" seldom came voluntarily. I always had to ask him or remind him of what he had promised to do. So, once in awhile, we would fight, and our fighting was always about household chores. One day, I found myself more stressed out than usual because I had so much studying to do and our home was in such a mess. While trying to clean up our place, I exploded in frustration and anger and began to criticize Suk-Hwan's uncooperative behavior. Typically, he would fight back with his own excuses. But, that day, he was just quiet, listening to my stories. When I finally calmed down. He said, "Honey, though you don't think so, I am really trying. But, do you know how hard it is for me to give up my privilege as a Korean male?" Well, we did not fight that day...

It has been over 27 years since I moved to America, and now, I find myself as an insider in many ways: I am an American citizen. I am an ordained clergy in the United

Methodist Church, one of the mainline denominations. I have served as a District Superintendent. I am on the Board of Trustees at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. I am the lead pastor of a vibrant church in an affluent Chicago suburb. I am the mother of two married children and the grandmother of a very cute 4-year old boy. And also, my son is in seminary and wants to become a pastor. What a privileged woman I am! I realize that my socio-economic status is among the majority, though I am categorized as an ethnic minority. In many ways, I am no longer an outsider but an insider! And, I wonder what kind of impact this status change has made on me - especially when it comes to my views of outsiders and my behavior towards them and their plight...

Let us hear again what the apostle Peter said to the resident aliens in Asia Minor, the words that still hold resonance for us, Christians today: "You are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called out of darkness into his own marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9).

While we may no longer live as minorities, outsiders, who are constantly subjected to exclusion, discrimination, mistreatment, abuse, and persecution even to the point of death, the apostle's words should still convict us. We must examine our lives and see how the soothing balms of "You are special, you have been chosen for a special mission" have turned into a sword of privilege that we wield rather than a shield of hope. We must recapture how to once again boldly proclaim our faith. I believe that it is by taking off our insider status that the words of the apostle can still resonate and echo forth in these changing times.

The challenge that lies before us then is to examine our lives, to see what is revealed as we revel in "his marvelous light." Are we following in the example of Christ's suffering by embracing our own cross? Are we forsaking the privileges and entitlements we sometimes enjoy as insiders? Are we actively seeking to identify as outsiders, as resident aliens, as servants of God, so that we can truly know Christ and make him known in the world?

[Closing Prayer] "The Wesley Covenant Prayer"

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it be ratified in heaven.

[Song: “You Are the Seed” UM Hymnal #583, v. 3]

You are the life that will nurture the plant;
You’re the waves in a turbulent sea;
Yesterday’s yeast is beginning to rise,
A new loaf of bread it will yield.

There is no place for a city to hide,
Nor a mountain can cover its might;
May your good deeds show a world in despair
A path that will lead all to God.

Go, my friends, go to the world, proclaiming love to all,
Messengers of my forgiving peace, eternal love.
Be, my friends, a loyal witness, from the dead I a-rose;
“Lo, I’ll be with you forever, till the end of the world.”