

I Peter 1:17-23

- 17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.
- 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors,
- 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.
- 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.
- 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.
- 22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.
- 23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

WHAT WE CAN'T DO - Be Too "At Home Here"

One of the privileges I have after all these years in ministry is that I get to serve on the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Indiana Annual Conference. On the Board I have met some amazing lay persons, including Indiana's longest serving Judge, Judge John Baker of the Indiana Appellate Court. Judge John Baker is a leader at St. Luke's United Methodist Church here in Indianapolis and has served on the Appellate Court since his appointment in 1989. He has served as Chief Judge, and has heard more than 15,000 cases, and written the majority opinion on more than 5000 cases.

We would like to think that the judiciary is fair and impartial. Judge Baker suggested we should consider the statistics. Most of the cases filed in Indiana are decided by trial court. More than 19,000 cases were considered in 2018. There were over 1.2 million legal filings in that year, both civil and criminal. Out of the 19,000 cases less than 1 percent were heard on appeal by the Indiana Supreme Court - 35 criminal, 32 civil, and 60 attorney disciplinary. When your case doesn't even get heard, it's very difficult to have confidence in the courts' fairness and impartiality.

And yet, tonight's text begins with, "Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially." Is that supported in the rest of Scripture? Yes.

In Acts 10, Peter is quoted as saying, "I now truly understand that God does not show favoritism." In Galatians 2 Paul says, "God does not show favoritism." The fairness and impartiality of God's judgement is the gold standard of justice.

But why, then, should we be not "at home" here and now in this life? Why are we called to live as foreigners?

Scripture makes this admonition clear. “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:21) “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34) In Deuteronomy 10 we read, “. . . show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” And in 1 Chronicles 29, “We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors.” We think we deserve, have earned, or have rights that others don’t. That simply is not Scriptural.

But Scripture DOES say that God treasures us so much that God has redeemed us from sin and death by something more precious than silver and gold. What is more precious than silver and gold? Listen to what Scripture says.

“The judgments of the Lord are true, altogether righteous, more precious than gold, much pure gold.” (Psalm 19:9-10)

“The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.” (Psalm 119:72)

In the Gospel of John, we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and there was not anything made that was not made by the Word . . . and the Word was made flesh.” (John 1:1, 3, 14) And then Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, declares, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Paul declares, “God presented Him as an atoning sacrifice through faith in His blood, in order to demonstrate His righteousness,” (Romans 3:25) So Jesus, the Word of God, God’s one and only, the atoning sacrifice for OUR sin, is more precious than silver and gold, and that is what the love of God has spent, has lavished on us.

Isn’t it then, reasonable that we should do and be our best for the sake of our Savior and our God? How does that happen?

Peter says, “purify yourselves.” He had already said that before the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), declaring, “God gave the Holy Spirit . . . for He purified their hearts by faith.” When we trust God, God purifies us through the Holy Spirit. And since we are purified through faith by God’s Spirit, we have no choice but to “. . . get rid of all moral filth and every expression of evil, and humbly receive the word planted in you, which can save your souls.” (James 1:21) And the author of Hebrews says, “. . . how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, purify our consciences from works of death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14) And James encourages, “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands sinner and purify your hearts.” (James 4:8)

What is the evidence of our purified hearts? Sincere love. Peter says it more than once. “. . . Love one another deeply, from the heart.” “Above all love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 1 and 4). Jesus commands us, “love one another as I have loved you . . .” (John 13) And Paul commands, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Outdo yourselves in honoring one another.” (Romans 12:10)

Peter's final promise for us, who have been bought with that which is more precious than silver and gold, who have responded by stepping up to purity of life and love for each other, is we are "born of imperishable seed." What can we offer in this life that bears witness to that "imperishable seed."

The last time the United States of America has had to deal with a crisis of the magnitude of this Coronavirus was in December 1941. On December 7, the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, to enormous human and material loss. That attack was followed by strikes on U. S. interests all over the Pacific. Our nation was desperate for some good news. Life Magazine responded, in their December edition, with the story of the United States first air hero of this brand-new worldwide conflict. Captain Colin P. Kelly, Jr., the first Army Officer to pilot the new B17 Flying Fortress, ". . .dove his plane straight into the Japanese battleship, Haruna, released a stick of high explosives almost into the mouths of flaming guns, and then vanished himself in the mighty explosion that ushered the 29,000-ton ship to the bottom of the sea."

The immediate response from a nation desperate for good news was experienced in South Bronx, New York City, where four-year old Colin Powell, whose Jamaican born parents had insisted on calling their son "Kahlin", found their little boy proudly declaring, "I am 'Kolin.'"

A week later, President Franklin Roosevelt wrote a letter, "To the President of the United States in 1956 . . ." It was a letter of hope, that there would even BE a United States in 1956, and it was a letter of promise. Roosevelt's letter asked the 1956 President to appoint Captain Colin Kelly's infant son, Colin P. Kelly III, to West Point, his father's Alma Mater.

When Colin P. Kelly III was ready for West Point, President Eisenhower was more than willing to appoint him. Young Kelly refused the appointment. He decided that if he couldn't get in on his own merits, then he shouldn't get in. He believed that each one should do what was necessary.

When it comes to our salvation, there is no legacy scholarship. Each one of us must make our own decision and do our own work. Each of us must choose to trust Jesus, more precious than silver and gold, to welcome us to heaven, not based on the good things we have done, but because he loves us, and invites us to accept his gift of saving grace.

And then there is the "fake news" of the Life Magazine account. Captain Kelly did not sink a Japanese cruiser in a blaze of glory. What really happened is even more inspiring.

Captain Kelly's B17 took off from Clark Field, the Philippines, on December 10. His flight did include dropping bombs on Japanese naval vessels, but none were sunk. Instead, Japanese Zeros followed Captain Kelly as he headed back to Clark Field, engaged Kelly's plane, and damaged it so that as Kelly approached his landing the Flying Fortress was on fire. Kelly ordered his eight-man crew to bailout, and as they ejected to safety, he continued to fly the plane, so that it would safely clear them, until it exploded in a ball of fire. He sacrificed himself for the safety of his crew.

That is what our God has done for us. That is what imperishable seed is. It is love so deep and sincere that the good of others is more important than one's own safety, one's own life. Have you been born of this imperishable seed?