**Exiles: Finding Hope While Scattered**

A Series on the Book of First Peter

Message 5 – “Bless the Mess” (1 Peter 3:8-22)

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Hello and welcome to St. Paul’s church. My name is Matt Skillen and I am one of the pastors here. We are blessed that you are here today. No matter if you are viewing this worship experience on a small screen by yourself or on a big screen with several people around you, we welcome you and pray the very presence of Christ is with you. No matter where we go, or where we may roam, Christ is with us.

Over the last eight weeks, while the church doors have been closed, unable to open due to a global pandemic, we’ve seen the remarkable reach of the Church. Yes, we have been scattered across our region, and while we are in exile from one another I hope you’ve been tracking with our current series, titled fittingly, “Exiles,” you’ve seen the *timeliness* and the *timelessness* message found in Peter’s first letter to fellow Christ-followers. God’s word always delivers and never fails; and it is our sincere hope that our focus on 1 Peter continues to serve as a path you can take to align your heart to the heart of God.

Today’s message is titled, “Bless the Mess” and for the next few minutes we will engage in a text of scripture that challenges us to examine who we are when others are awful to us—when people malign, bully and persecute us. Who are we when that happens? It’s kind of a mess, don’t you think? I believe we can best answer this question by addressing another, and that is this, “Who defines us?”

If you have your Bible, I invite you to turn to 1 Peter 3. We’ll pick up Peter’s letter at verse 8. While you are moving to that passage, I’d like to take a moment to prepare our hearts for God’s word. It’s been eight weeks—eight long weeks—since our lives were upended and turned inside out by our pandemic conditions. And now, even as parts of our community begin to reopen, I know that many are weary, some are tired. If you’re like me, you go through periods of optimism followed by periods of sadness; times of confidence and times of fear. Before we dive into the text for today, I’d like to share with you a blessing, and it comes from **Psalm 65**. Hear the word of God and let it wash over you. Let it restore you and fortify you.

*Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion.*

*And to you shall vows be performed, O you who answers prayer!*

*To you all flesh shall come.*

*When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.*

*Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.*

*We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house. Your holy temple.*

*By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation;*

*You are the hope of all the ends of the earth and the farthest seas,*

*You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves,*

*the tumult of the peoples.*

*Those who live at earth’s farthest bounds are awed by your signs;*

*You make gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy*

*You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it;*

*The river of God is full of water;*

*You provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.*

*You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,*

*Softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.*

*You crown the year with your bounty;*

*your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*

*The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,*

*The meadows clothe themselves with flocks,*

*the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.*

No matter where you are today, even if you feel overwhelmed, let the Spirit of the Lord overwhelm you. Nothing on this earth, not even a novel virus, can separate us from the love of God. And in all things, in all places and in all times, even today, all praise and glory belongs to the Lord of our lives—Jesus Christ—the only name worthy of our praise.

Let us pray: Father, You are the author of all things seen and unseen, the One who oversees time and space. We are humbled by Your presence in the lives of all of those who call upon the name of Jesus. May Your will be done. Now Father, I ask humbly that You will open Your word to us. May we hear clearly the message You have prepared, and may we take it from here so that others may hear of Your great name. Amen.

Let’s come back to that question, **“Who Defines You?”**

In so many places and spaces, be it on YouTube, cable news, Instagram or Capitol Hill, it appears that in a time of absolute crisis, everyone rushes to define themselves. Pro-quarantine, anti-vaccine, pro-bailout, anti-government… These *pro-* and *anti-* labels, while attractive and sometimes valiant, create an instant conflict. If I am *pro-* something, then it creates a space for me to be at odds, quite literally, with someone else who is *anti-* the same thing. And there you have it. According to the world, this other person and I are now sitting in opposite camps and we are engaged in battle with one another. We’ve done what our culture expects by defining ourselves in a group. And while this is rather routine and common in our culture it has been amplified to a remarkable degree in light of a significant crisis.

Something that I’ve noticed recently is that when some loudly and routinely define themselves according to these labels we see in our culture, they will often corner themselves because they have drawn so many lines they simply won’t cross. nIn doing so, they spin a web of non-negotiables they can’t possibly escape. And if I’m being honest, I believe the church often finds itself in a similar trap. So, I’ll ask again, “Who defines you?”

In other cases, we might be victimized by someone else—physically or emotionally. We’ve been targeted by someone who, for no other reason, has gone out of his or her way to cause real harm. How are we supposed to respond? *Who defines us?*

If we follow what the world says, we will commit energy, time and treasure to defeat the opposite side—those who identify in opposition to us. I happen to believe this is finite thinking and it captivates the hearts and minds of people every single day. Whether it is Philadelphia vs. Pittsburgh, Republicans vs. Democrats, perpetrator vs victim, or Hatfields vs. McCoys, we are programmed to win against the opposite side. And if we don’t win, we are programmed to seek revenge. This fuels a bitterness that may never really be extinguished. Let me start there by saying, with all honesty, that bitterness harbors nothing but bitterness. When the revenge we seek is ultimately realized it might feel good for a moment, but, that moment is fleeting. It will quickly recede to bitterness once more. That is something of a mess, isn’t it?

How can we navigate this from a Kingdom perspective?

Are we defined by our camps, our labels, our hurts, our wins and losses? Or are we defined by something else?

Our central text for the message today is 1 Peter 3, and this section of text spells out quite clearly how we are defined through Christ. And, as is often the case, how we as Christ followers are defined will fly in the face of how the world looks to define us.

It says in verse 8,

*Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind (***1 Peter 3:8***).*

In the last few weeks, we’ve heard messages that, at first glance dealt with really difficult topics of submission—submission to authorities and submission in relationships. To round out his message on this thread, Peter says, “*Finally…*” You see he’s touched on some really culturally significant issues and brings his thesis to a turning point by saying, instead of being a people who are driven by self-interests and accomplishments, (the things the world might value) we are defined by Christ. And as we are defined by Christ, we are called to, quite simply, “*a unity of spirit*, *sympathy, and love for one another*.” We should not be locked in conflict with one another, but we should live in unity, sympathy and love. And Peter doesn’t stop there. In the next verse he takes it up a whole new level and says in verse 9,

*Don’t repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary****,***

***repay with a blessing****. It is for this that you were called—that you*

*might inherit a blessing (***1 Peter 3:9***).*

Friends, this may be the best word we can hear today. No matter who you are or where you are viewing this service today, we have all faced multiple situations where someone has treated us badly, insulted us, hurt us or hurt someone we love. Evil does exist and unfortunately it impacts us—particularly when we least expect it. As a result, we may want nothing more than to repay evil with revenge. That is how the world would expect us to feel and, in some cases, it might be completely justified according to the laws of the world, but *who defines us*? The world or Christ? If we are defined by Christ then we are called, as the text suggests, to not live as the world lives, to not retaliate as the world retaliates, but to live in unity, sympathy and love for one another no matter what conditions we are living in.

I get it. There are times in life when grace runs low. When, due to whatever it might be, you’ve had enough and, in extreme cases, unity, sympathy and love are the furthest thing from your mind. If you’ve reached your end. If you believe you have nothing left to give, you are not alone. In his letter to Christians all over the world, Peter quotes a passage from **Psalm 34** to give hope, a glimmer of inspiration. He says,

*Those who desire life*

*And desire to see good days*

*Let them keep their tongues from evil*

*And their lips from speaking deceit;*

*Let them turn away from evil and do good;*

*Let them seek peace and pursue it.*

*For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,*

*And his ears are open to their prayer.*

*But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*

Last week, Pastor David shared that a primary lesson in Peter’s first letter is that **our witness for Christ is more important than anything else**. This purposeful reference to Psalm 34 is but one of many ways we can find in the Biblical text that reverberates the message that we are the very illustration of Christ on Earth. We should live as Christ lived so that new pathways to salvation can be forged. In our daily lives there are mindsets and actions we can take to communicate to the world there is a better way to live—to navigate the mess our human experience creates. In this small slice of scripture, Peter shares three things we can do to live out our calling, to be a light, to be a better example of Christ to the world. Instead of seeking revenge, instead of living like the rest of the world, there are choices we can make that will outlive us and make a far greater impact for Christ.

**Be eager to do good.**

For example, in verses 13 and 14, Peter says,

*Now who will harm you if you are* ***eager to do what is good****? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed (***1 Peter 3:13,14***).*

When we are defined by Christ, and we are eager to do good, we are always on the lookout for the next good thing we can do. Not because it brings us glory, but because we know that by seeing the good in us, others will see the mission and purpose of Christ.

If I could name an identifying marker in the DNA of St. Paul’s church, it would be that this church is eager to do good. Why? Not to bring glory to St. Paul’s or to the Methodist Church but to point all glory and praise to Christ, that is who this church is and it is what visitors, long-time attenders and members will tell you about St. Paul’s. It is a church that is eager to do good. If you are looking to adopt this characteristic, you are in luck. There are several people who call St. Paul’s home who will serve as role models for you. That is what is truly remarkable about being eager to do good. Goodness has this encircling effect that is infectious. It’s as if one selfless act of goodness is like a large rock being thrown into a lake. The more good we seek to do for the Kingdom of God the larger the ripples in the pool will spread. And here’s the good news. Yes, I think this is good news. If we do suffer for doing what is right, Peter says, *“[we] are blessed*.”

That may sound confusing at first glance, but let’s look at this with curiosity for a moment.

The beautiful thing about being eager to do good, compounded by the rapid multiplication of goodness that naturally unfolds in the Kingdom perspective, if you suffer for doing what is right, look around. There’s an entire community surrounding you eager to do good. You will be blessed.

**Sanctify Christ.**

Continuing with the second half of verse 14, Peter outlines the identity we have in Christ, in saying,

*Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence (***1 Peter 3:14-16***).*

As we live for Christ, we can do so without fear because we have named Christ as Lord of our lives. This should constitute a remarkable change in us, and others will notice. And of those who notice, some may disagree with you. And yet others may be curious to learn more about the transformation in you. Peter instructs us to respond with gentleness and reverence when we talk about Christ. To do it any other way could lead to a false impression. The very character of Christ in us leads us to gentleness, reverence and humility. And it is our witness to the rest of the world that will lead others to call upon the Father for salvation.

**Keep You Conscience Clear.**

Finally, Peter says,

*Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who*

*abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to*

*suffer for doing evil* (**1 Peter 3:16-17**).

In our journey, the travel is light when we no longer carry grudges that can ultimately weigh us down. Those things that we carry with us, the dead weight of a broken relationship or a really bad argument that has never been resolved. These things are heavy, and they can jeopardize our health, our relationships and our witness for Christ. If there is someone you need to forgive today, even if by just praying to God saying you forgive him or her, I encourage you to take that step. To clear your conscience. And, if your conscience needs to be cleared by having a courageous conversation with someone else, I encourage you to find a way to have that conversation. I can tell you from personal experience there is great freedom found in these conversations and the clear conscience that comes with it.

This is important because **when**—not if—we are maligned, those who would harm us for doing good for Christ will be put to shame.

There is a healing power that can be found in these markers of character. Doing good, sharing your love of Christ with others, and clearing your conscience. This will set you apart and create the amazing space God needs to use in a calling he has put especially on your life.

Who defines you?

You might be saying Pastor Matt, I’ve been defined by the world for so long and I am tired. I am living in a mess and I know God is calling me to Him. I want to be defined by Christ. I want to share unity, love and hope to others.

If that is you, say it now. Tell someone. Call the church that you want to take a bold step in your relationship with Christ (717) 367-1889. Leave a message with me, Pastor Matt, or one of the other pastors that you would like to discuss this. Take it to the next level today and say that I am no longer going to live as the world would have me live. I am living today for God.

Let us pray:

Father, as so many of your children are hearing you speak directly to their hearts right now, I ask You to fill them with Your Spirit. May they know that You are with them and that as they turn their hearts to Yours, they will feel empowered to do good, to share their love of You with others and to clear their conscience of the grudges and guilt they carry; that they will seek unity of spirit, gentleness, humility and love. -Amen

Some of you reading today might not know entirely what we mean by being defined by Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? He is God’s only Son and when He lived here on earth He lived completely without sin. He was tried and executed on false charges, but His death meant so much more. By dying on a cross, He died for my sins and He died for yours, too, which means that nothing would ever come between us and God. To receive this amazing salvation from Jesus all you have to do is ask for it! If that is you today I am going to ask you to pray a simple prayer with me. All you have to do is repeat after me. Church, no matter where you are today, join with me in repeating this prayer so that no one prays this alone.

Dear Jesus.

I know I am a sinner.

I know that I have sought to define myself according to the world.

No longer. You have my heart. It is Yours.

Thank You for saving me so that I may know You.

--Amen