

Sermon Text: Matthew 7:21-29

I do hope before the sermon is over you understand what my title means, "Expatriates of Heaven." If not, well, ask me on the way out, and we'll work that out.

But first, I want to begin with a story. A young woman, who wanted to get married, sat next to her shy, very shy suitor on a park bench, and she asked, "Do you think my eyes are like the stars?" He said, "Yep." And she asked, "Do you think my teeth are like a string of pearls?" He said, "Yeah." And she asked again, "Do you think my complexion is like rose petals?" He said, "Yeah." And, "Do you think my hair shines like gold in the moonlight?" He said, "Yeah." Then she said, "Oh Joe, you say the most wonderful things!"

Now, why do we come together as we do, week after week? If I were to say we come together as the community of Christ in order to satisfy a deep hunger for God, we experience together God's presence in community and the presence of God's spirit through prayer and worship, or we come together in the presence of God in ways that will be for us healing or empowering or renewing, or we come together to better understand that the more we reach out beyond ourselves to serve others, the more intensely we are able to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, if I said all of these sorts of words, and having heard these words, you could nod your heads in agreement, and some of you may say, "Oh preacher, you say the most wonderful things!" Yes, we agree with you, those words sound familiar, they sound complimentary, they sound good, but words come easily, but do they speak the truth in terms of real meaning in our lives? "Not everyone who says Lord, Lord but he who does the will of my father," says Jesus. The Gospel is concerned that we are honest to God about ourselves, about who we are, down at the level where life is pulsing and beating and pulling at us, and about our rebelliousness and our hostility toward Jesus' command that we love one another, about the way we hurt other people, and about our indifference to those outside of our tiny, sometimes tiny world view.

Gilbert Stewart was famous for painting over a hundred portraits of George Washington. He was also famous for using colors and light in vivid ways. Now, Benjamin West was also a great painter, and he was giving a lecture about Gilbert Stewart, and he used to say to his pupils, "It's no use to steal Stewart's colors. If you want to paint as he does, you'll have to steal his eyes." When we are baffled in our efforts to live as Christ lived, the story of his life, however wonderful it is, the story alone will not enable us to be like him. What we need is his eyes, his heart, his nature. Thank you. Nothing less than God's Holy Spirit within us can enable us to see the world and to see others as God does. After the disciples were filled with the spirit, admit they were able to see the world and others and life and death as God did. All the time and all the lessons and parables that Jesus taught did not do it. God's spirit within them, did. Then they could see as Jesus saw. Then they could love as Jesus loved, and face the world knowing that the world as it is had been overcome on the cross. Psalm 51:6 says "Behold, thou desirous truth in the inward being, therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." There is a place deep within us that only God's spirit can touch, that only God's spirit can teach and inspire. We are those gathered today

touched by God's love and touched by a deep love for all others. We are filled with a gnawing ought to be, a vision of the world which never was nor ever will be except by God's intervention. A world of peace. A world of justice. A world of unity and no more war. Now, we oddly almost have a nostalgia for that world even though we have never seen it. We feel strangely ill at ease and not at home with the way things are even though they have never been any different than they are now. Where do we get that sense of longing for a world that never was? I believe from God's vision for creation. I believe from God's Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We are expatriates of Heaven. We long for that peace and that place we know in our bones, in our marrow, in the depth of our souls must exist. We know it. We see it, even though, here, it has never been. That urge, that feeling, is an echo of Heaven, of our higher citizenship, of God's vision of how things were supposed to be. An expatriate is a citizen who is living outside of his own land, outside of her own land, living in a foreign country. Now, Jesus had a wonderful way of telling a story and making a point. I believe the prodigal son story makes that point. He had to go away and live in a foreign land before he understood what home was about. We live in a foreign land, the world as it is, and we long for home with God.

A little boy was born blind. An operation was performed when he was a teenager, and miraculously, he was healed. His mother took him outside to uncover his eyes, and when he saw for the first time the earth and the sky and the trees and the birds, he said, "Mother, why didn't you tell me it was so beautiful!" She burst into tears, and said, "I tried to tell you dear, but you couldn't understand me." And so it is when you try to tell what God's vision is for creation. As long as we are locked in upon ourselves, we can't see it. You don't have to look very far away. Not only between countries and nations is self-interest causing chaos, but also between individuals and even in your own household. Part of what sin is, is seeing only what you want to see and only within the frame you want to see it, seeing only what you want to see in the terms that you desire, a construct of the world that makes you happy. Now that's a self and self-centered view, not the view that God had for our world. In other words, it's a life turned in upon itself, which is sin. Paying attention only to yourself and pretty much ignoring everyone else. Now that's part of what sin is, not seeing the blind beggars as Jesus did, and not stopping for the stripped, beaten man as Jesus encouraged in the Good Samaritan story, and not sending home the hungry crowd, but feeding them instead, not calling up armies of angels, but willingly going to the cross for you and me. He died for you and me even though we can't see how blind we are. Do you doubt for a minute that Jesus saw the world differently than anyone else? He saw inside of hearts, and he felt other people's pain, really felt, not just words, but felt our pain, our prejudices, our hatred, our wounds, our anger, our fears, our guilt, he felt all of that on the cross. He felt the pain we cause each other, and yet it's by his stripes and by his feeling our pain that we are healed. We are called to do the hard thing, to open our eyes and to see beyond the surface and to love one another as Christ loved us. In First Peter, the first chapter, verse 22, it says, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for sincere love of the brethren, love one another, love one another earnestly, from the heart." When God is inside, we can love from the heart, from the inside out, like lava erupting when the pressure is too great, the pain of this world ought to scream God's love out of us, saying, "No, no, this way, this way, follow me as I follow Christ." We ought to

show the world God's love because we cannot contain it within ourselves, but the truth is, we can contain ourselves, and we do contain ourselves, and we quench the spirit, the very spirit which gives us life, real life. Expatriates of Heaven. We are living strange, deep love in a world that knows nothing about it. Expatriates of Heaven living strange, deep love in a world that knows only self. The world has little reason to believe such love exists unless we show it, unless we live it out.

There's a story that I like about a man who decided to climb a high mountain, and he said, "If I go on the top of that high mountain, I ought to be able to talk to God." So he climbed up on top of that high mountain, and he said as loudly as he could, "God, what do you want me to do?" He was surprised when a voice came back, "Live out justice. Live out kindness. Live out mercy." The man said, "Oh, no, no, I was just testing." The voice came back and said, "I was, too."

What we are talking about is holiness. We think holiness is a denomination, but no it's a state of being. Holiness means set apart for God's use. Holy living is living apart from the values of this world and living out God's values even when it costs. Living as a stranger here, as an expatriate of Heaven. Strange Godly customs, strange costly love, and odd detachment from and generosity with wealth and ability to actually forgive and actually care for enemies. Holiness. It means set apart. Separate from the normal, separate from worldly, no longer self-centered, instead, God-centered. The same God who always sends us out to each other. You know we talk a good talk about these things, but we want to get all the world has to offer first, and then maybe we'll dabble in the things of the Spirit. We are citizens of two worlds, and we struggle with raising our children as children of God, but also make sure they can succeed as children of the world.

On the radio, they'll wonder what that silence is for. I just needed some water.

We still sacrifice our lives and even our children to idols. Let me be clear. Will Willimon asks, "Maybe the question is not will we sacrifice our children. The question is to which god upon which altar will we sacrifice our children." Then he told the story of Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, a ministry that we participate in. Fuller preached at a church where Willimon was attending, and in the sermon, Fuller told about he and his wife, who decided to move his family out of their comfortable and affluent suburban life into the poor section, the city of Americus, GA, and there they were to wait for God to tell them what to do next. God, Mr. Fuller believed, was telling him to build houses for the poor, one house at a time, and to live in the poor neighborhood. At church the next week, people asked Willimon a curious question, they said, "How old were the Fullers children when he made that move to Americus, GA?" Willimon replied, "Well, they must have been small. They're all grown up now." Willimon writes, "I did not understand the point of the question until the second person asked virtually the same question, "How old were the Fuller's children when they decided to uproot the family and move to the poor section of Americus, GA?" Then I got the point, it's fine for Millard Fuller to have some sort of experience, to get converted, or to be born again, or what have you, and to do what he wants to do about it, but it is not fine for him to drag his helpless

children into all that with him.” These people thought that was unfair. They thought that it violated the dignity and the freedom of the children. What they were saying was, “How old were Fuller’s children? Was it fair to bring them along and follow that vision God had given him?” One of the people who asked this question, Willimon continued, was a man whose daughter, he knew, had been on birth control pills since she was in her early teens and his son was in the second series of treatments at a drug abuse center, and so he asked the question is not, “Will we sacrifice our children?”, the question is “To which god and upon which altar will we sacrifice our children? Where is our allegiance in our lives, in our work, in our time, in our talent, in our treasure, and in the raising and the priorities of raising our children.” “We are all busy,” says Willimon, “laying their lives, the children’s lives, upon some altar, so the question is not if we shall be like Abraham and be willing to give our children to God, but rather, which god shall have the lives of our children.” You can serve God, or you can serve self. Self makes a very bad god. Self is never satisfied. Self is hypercritical of you and of others. Self desires, and then tires, and then desires something else. Serving self is an all-consuming job. Now the definition of holiness is giving all we are to God. God can be trusted to shape this rough clay into something beautiful, into something eternally significant. We cannot do that though without God’s spirit changing us from the inside out. In the book, Resident Aliens, it says the confessing church seeks to influence the world by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be. The world teaches something quite different. The difference is becoming more stark these days.

I saw a promo a few weeks ago on television for a reality show with a South Carolina girl smiling at the camera and saying on this reality show, I forget the name of it, I just remember she was from Gaffney, and the point is not about people from Gaffney, that’s not the point, I don’t know how many of you are from Gaffney, but this South Carolina girl was on the television, entering this reality show, and she said, “I will lie. I will cheat. I will charm anyone to get what I want.” Then she smiled and said, “I do it every day.” I thought, “How tragic.” In reality shows, selfish goals and abuse of power and lying and false friendship and carnal use of other people, all these things can make you a winner in these shows! That is the world. That is not the kingdom of God Jesus lived and brought us into. We are aliens to the values in pop music. We are aliens to the TV’s casual, superficial sex. We are aliens to the idea that each person makes up their own morality as they go to suit the needs of the moment. We are aliens to the idea that faith does not matter. We are aliens to hatred and prejudice and revenge as a way of life. We are expatriates of Heaven living as an outpost for God’s coming kingdom, and it is time that we take seriously and pray for the strength to grow in that faith and to grow in that world view and to act on it in our lives. We are strangers here. Strange as Christ was. Set apart for God as Christ was. In, but not of the world as Christ was. We know the world was meant to be different than it is. We feel it in our bones. We know that we are meant to be different, and in Christ we can be. For now, we live in the world, but in Christ we are not of the world. We are expatriates of Heaven, representatives of God’s coming kingdom, and those who long for God to fully come. In Christ’s name, amen.