



First United Church of Oak Park

Claiming a Christian Identity

1 Peter 1:17-23

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Today, there are 2.3 billion Christians worldwide, making up approximately one third of the world's population; the United States, has the highest number of Christians of any country and Christians make up over 78% of the US population.

This tells us that Christianity, especially in the context of the United States, is a part of the dominant culture. Meaning, as Christian-identifying people, we are a part of the dominant culture.

This was not the case in this letter from 1 Peter, whose audience is believed to have been located in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey, and would have been some of the earliest Christians. We're talking just 30 years or so after the death of Jesus. Therefore, the recipients of this letter were among the first generation of converts to Christianity. And because of their location, they likely converted from pagan, or polytheistic, traditions. And for many of these new Christian believers, the decision to become a Christian had costly familial and social consequences: creating conflict between loved ones, and making them targets of hostility, ostracization, and persecution in society.

I identify as a straight, white, cisgender, Christian, woman. These are the identities I have both been socialized into and claimed for myself; they also are identities firmly entrenched in our dominant culture. Which means I have lived my life almost entirely within the center of power and privilege in a society that has been built around and to sustain that center, which includes Christianity--Protestant Christianity, in particular.

So, I cannot say what it feels like to be ostracized for choosing a different faith tradition than my family of origin or to go against the culture and traditions I was raised in and with. I can only imagine how life-altering it is to convert to another religious tradition, I can only imagine the kind of spiritual transformation, identity formation or re-formation, it would involve.

And that is what it seems these, our Christian ancestors, the community receiving this letter, were grappling with, now on the outskirts of society's dominant religious culture. They defied their inherited, ancestral traditions and culture, and chose to follow a new path, to walk the way of Christ.

So, although I cannot know what it is like to convert to another religious tradition, I can easily see how one's conversion would trigger questions of belonging and necessitate a re-forming and claiming of their new identity. This is a crisis of identity, of trying to put together the pieces of who you are and who you seek to be, of the values you inherited and those you have adopted, and of where you fit into the communities you are a part of. This identity crisis forced these early Christian believers into living an exilic experience. Which is what the author

is referring to in Verse 17 when they say, “during your time of exile.” Imagine living a life of exile, while still in a familiar place, with familiar people.

What had been, for their entire lives, a familiar place, with familiar people, had begun to feel strange and unwelcoming, not because it or its people had changed but because these new Christian converts had changed. Their new identity as Christians had changed them and they were left to discern what that meant. What that meant for them as individuals, what that meant for them as this new community of believers, and what that meant for their relationships with their wider community, which may not have been Christian, but that they were still very much a part of.

This letter, the Book of 1 Peter, is a response to these new believers, and their authentic, universal struggle for understanding and belonging. And in this particular passage, the author is seeking to remind them of the new ancestral story they were invited into, chose to believe and become a part of, and that had transformed them. A story of hope, to guide their understanding, and of love, to give them that sense of belonging.

This letter is written to them in love and hope; it expresses that, in their context, divine liberation through Christ’s death was both alienating and empowering. It both acknowledges their struggle and suffering of living an exilic experience in their pagan environment, as well as empowers them and encourages them to live in hope as members of the family of God they now are a part of. A family, a community, rooted in deep, mutual love. And as members of this family and community, this deep, mutual love is how they are called to live in relationship with their fellow Christians as well as non-Christians. Because the nature of *who* God is shapes *how* we as Christians are meant to live. God is love and we are meant to live in love, with one another and with all people.

This week, I happened upon this book on my shelf which I probably haven’t opened since seminary. It is called *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*. I want to share an excerpt with you from its last chapter titled “Staying in Church” that comments on being the church community. It says...

[One writer] testifies that their most frequent encounters with God are in the natural world. Given the demands of being in community with people, this should not be surprising.

It is telling that the settings that we tend to describe as “peaceful” are invariably places with few, if any, people...but to me, the affirmation that God can be found outside the church has never seemed like much of a claim. The true wonder is that God can be found inside the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another. What an unlikely setting in which to encounter God! But the Christian God seems to like to surprise us by showing up in the most unpromising places, like a man from Nazareth and in the motley gathering of people known as church.

God throws us together in the church and says in essence, “Here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere.”

It is not a coincidence that Jesus said both “Love your neighbor,” and “Love your enemy,” because often they are the same person. Living in community is an essential Christian practice because it gives us such ample opportunity to learn how to receive the stranger and practice forgiveness...The church, like the family, is the place where we learn to live with people we are stuck with. And when we stick together, it is a living reminder of the God who is stuck with us all.

Unlike our ancestors from 1 Peter, we do not live in a context where our Christian identity is outside of the dominant culture, but that doesn't mean we don't struggle with understanding or belonging. But thankfully, we are called into community, as part of the Church, where we are reminded of our ancestral story of hope and love. And as the excerpt I just read also reminds us, participating in the life of a church community is an essential Christian practice that teaches us how to receive the stranger, gives us ample opportunity to practice forgiveness, and learn to love enemy and neighbor; so that when we are in contexts different from this one, we can take comfort in the assurance that God is stuck with us, and that our Christian identity, values, and beliefs will guide us and the ways in which we live, move, and interact in the world.

We are called to do good in the world simply to be more like Christ and to glorify God. We are called to advocate for the liberation of others because we, ourselves, have been liberated. We are called to love because God is love and created us out of love. We are called to live in hope, because we have been witness to the hope of the living and enduring Word of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

May these words from 1 Peter be a humbling reminder to us all, of our ancestral history, of their struggle to claim their Christian identity, and inspire us to reform and reclaim our own Christian identity in ways that honor and serve our creator, our ancestors, and all people.

Amen.