

Life-Giving Seed

1 Peter 1:17-23 CEB ¹⁷ Since you call upon a Father who judges all people according to their actions without favoritism, you should conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your dwelling in a strange land. ¹⁸ Live in this way, knowing that you were not liberated by perishable things like silver or gold from the empty lifestyle you inherited from your ancestors. ¹⁹ Instead, you were liberated by the precious blood of Christ, like that of a flawless, spotless lamb. ²⁰ Christ was chosen before the creation of the world, but was only revealed at the end of time. This was done for you, ²¹ who through Christ are faithful to the God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory. So now, your faith and hope should rest in God. ²² As you set yourselves apart by your obedience to the truth so that you might have genuine affection for your fellow believers, love each other deeply and earnestly. ²³ Do this because you have been given new birth--not from the type of seed that decays but from seed that doesn't. This seed is God's life-giving and enduring word.

Life-Giving Seed

How many of us were born and raised in Thomasville? How many of us were born and raised in Davidson County? Geographically speaking, not many of us are natives. And we know that no matter how long we might live and work here, we will never quite be natives. Let's look at another category of defining our identity. How many of us were actively raised in a church? How many of us were raised as Presbyterians?

The First Letter of Peter was written to people who weren't raised in the faith of Abraham. They weren't Jews by birth or upbringing. Rather, they had grown up in the culture of the Greco-Roman world. In that culture there were many gods. These gods had various spheres of influence, gods of harvest, of the weather, gods of war, gods of this territory or that. Many of the gods were inter-related and their relationships were just as messy as human relationships, filled with jealousy, strife, love and hate, and children that were both legitimate and illegitimate. Humans offered sacrifices to the gods to appease their anger or to try to manipulate their favor and power. And you would pit your gods against your enemy's gods, and those who had the strongest gods would prevail.

And so, this letter known as First Peter is introducing these Gentiles, that is, these people who were not Jews – introducing them to a very different understanding of divinity. Just a couple of verses before today's reading, it says in verse fourteen, "Don't be conformed to your former desires, those that shaped you when you were ignorant." Verse eighteen refers to "the empty lifestyle you inherited from your ancestors." Peter is pointing out that they are making a huge shift from their former way of viewing life. It isn't just a change from many gods to one God. Their whole concept of the divine will change. Their whole concept of their purpose in life will change. Their relationship with God and with other human beings will be different.

As they learned about Jesus, they were introduced to a Son of God who was totally different from the Roman Emperor who claimed the title Son of God. Jesus didn't push people around, demanding their worship and their servitude. He didn't rule through power and fear. Instead, Jesus served others, genuinely caring for them, truly understanding their problems, relieving their suffering with empathy, compassion, and love. And Jesus spoke of God as Father, Father in the same tone of voice as a child would speak to a father who loved him. On one occasion, when Philip asked Jesus to reveal the Father to the disciples, Jesus replied, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9 CEB) The life of Jesus Christ

revealed the nature of God, showing that we can put our trust and hope in God. With God we are in a relationship like family, a relationship of caring and trust.

Just as God's role in the relationship is much like a loving parent, our role is like that of children. Verses fourteen and fifteen tell us, "as obedient children, ¹⁵ you must be holy in every aspect of your lives, just as the one who called you is holy." We don't balk too much at the concept of being children in our relationship with God. But the idea that we are to be holy just as God is holy sounds like a tall order. That sounds impossible and some people just throw up their hands and give up. Other people compile long lists of rules of behavior and try to obey them all, equating exact obedience to rules with holiness. Holiness becomes defined as strict attendance, giving ten percent and not a penny less to church, long hair for women and short hair for men, chastity and shunning sexual pleasure, not eating meat, dressing in specific ways, and any number of other detailed rules. This is the approach that the Pharisees took and others have followed that approach to this day. But Jesus rejected that legalistic, purity based interpretation of what holiness meant. Jesus lived and taught the standard of mercy because that more closely resembled God's own holiness. Just as God sends the rain on both the just and the unjust, we are to respond to everyone with love.

Just as God judges all people according to their actions without favoritism, we are called to do the same. But we often misunderstand the term judgment. Judgment is not the opposite of love. Judgment is not about condemning and criticizing. Instead, judgment is about wisely distinguishing right from wrong and exercising wise judgment in making choices. And since God is impartial, just because we call God "Father" doesn't mean that we should expect God to evaluate our lives in a different manner than the lives of others.

Peter's message is as appropriate and needed today as it was when he wrote to Christians with Gentile roots 2000 years ago. We have our gods that we worship with our time and our money, gods that we depend on for our happiness, our safety, our position, our confidence, our entertainment. Our gods are Apple, Lexus, Lands End, Carnival Cruises, NBA, NFL, ACC, Charles Schwab, Viagra, Bose, Samsung, MSNBC, FOX, and on and on the list goes. Like those Greco-Roman Gentiles, we, too, are called to leave behind the desires that are shaped by ignorance, to forsake the empty lifestyle we inherit from our culture. We too, are invited to have a family relationship with a God who loves and cares for us. When we place more trust in love than we do in things, when we are motivated by compassion more than fear, when we see others as brothers and sisters instead of as competition, then we become a people, a people who live as the family of God. And that makes us, to some degree, aliens to the culture we live in.

Peter writes that we are "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [our] ancestors." By ransom, he is not referring to some price paid to Satan or to God in some doctrine of atonement. Rather, in his teaching and his example, Christ has liberated us from ourselves, from our captivity in individualism, selfishness, greed, jealousy, and shallowness. In Christ, we see liberation from the treadmill of a life lived without real purpose or meaning. When we only plant the seeds of self-satisfaction, the seeds of style and façade, the seeds of living vicariously through the feats of athletic accomplishments of others, the seeds of social position and wealth, then we will eventually see those seeds decay. Styles change and what was attractive become dated and drab. The winning team's glory only lasts until the next game or the next season. The super smart phone becomes a dumb and slow paper weight in a couple of years. The fantastic job falls behind changing times and disappears. All of it is perishable seed that sprouts and grows for a while, then withers and is gone.

But Peter also writes about seed that doesn't decay. This seed is life-giving. This seed is God's word revealed in scripture and revealed in the life of Jesus. As this seed sprouts in our life we come to love each other deeply and earnestly. This seed produces growth in love for God, love for others, and love for ourselves. We grow in strength, in purpose, in usefulness, blooming where we are planted and bearing fruit.

I was struck by an example of this during the past week. The Thomasville Rotary Club paused to honor a long time member, Thurston Bowman. I do not know Thurston Bowman personally. And I suspect that he must have made a few mistakes during his life. But I heard him described as a "Christian gentleman" and I saw the fruit that unperishable seed produced in his life. Many people spoke of how he had set an example for them, an example of patience, perseverance, compassion, integrity, and wisdom. Though the term was never spoken, I heard of a life lived in servant leadership, leadership spent in promoting the good of others through gentle wisdom and dedicated effort on the school board, hospital board, the YMCA, and the Baptist Children's Home. Now, a lot of people seek these kinds of positions to polish their own image and to seek recognition. But two brothers convinced me that the seed planted in Thurston's life was imperishable. They arrived as children at Baptist Children's Home, coming from a single parent home where – as they expressed it – "money always ran out before month." They weren't just names on the roll of children to Thurston, who was an executive, the treasurer and assistant secretary for the home. He knew them, encouraged them, and cared about them. They were treated with the same love as his own children and through his efforts and guidance they were able to go to college and then on to get master's degrees. They are family to this day, all because of the imperishable seeds of compassion, love, and respect, seeds sown by Christ's example, seeds that were planted in Thurston's life, seeds that bore fruit.

How then shall we live? How will we be remembered? Will people speak of how we loved our car - or our neighbor? Will they remember our devotion to the Panthers - or to the poor? Will they remember the fine wine we served at our table, or the caring compassion with which we served the meals of grace? What seed decays? What seed is imperishable? Amen.

Sisters and brothers, the choice is ours –

We can sow seeds in our life that will sprout emptiness and meaninglessness
Or we can plant the seeds that are found in God's revealed word of scripture
and the Word as lived by Jesus Christ.

Those seeds do not rot and they sprout as eternal values in our own lives.