

Teaching at NCF 8.3.25

Good Morning New Covenant, thank you so much to Pastor Renee for inviting me to speak today and you all for having me. It is a joy to be back in this room with you all, and I am delighted to share this moment with you.

Will you all please breathe with me?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The letter that Laura read (thank you Mama), written by Peter, (probably, scholars disagree), and immortalized by thousands in our collection of sacred texts begins with an introduction to the audience. First Peter chapter one is addressed to "God's chosen strangers." I love this language because, in a thousand ways, we are strangers. Despite having known some of you and this room for the vast majority of my life, there is much we do not know about each other. Our author understands the barrier to trust that comes from a lack of familiarity with each others culture. They acknowledge this right off the bat. They continue to set up their letter with gratitude for the opportunity that they share with those who will receive this piece of writing. In this time, much like in our time, there is great need for change. There is a great need for hope and for deep and consistent effort in order to make a more just and more beautiful world. That kind of work is hard enough, and as we all are aware takes much much longer than we would like. Beyond being strangers, we are also simply mortal. We live lives that are often much too short, and much too painful. The author of First Peter knows this too, and later in chapter one reminds their readers of the words of Isaiah,

"All human life on the earth is like grass, and all human glory is like a flower in a field. The Grass dries up and its flower falls off, but the lord's word endures forever. 1 Peter 1:24-25"

This acknowledgement of our temporary nature heads off the second easy excuse of those who are, rightfully, afraid of what it will cost and how much impact it might actually have to dedicate our brief lives to something as important and radical as being the engine of social change. It is terrifying to imagine devoting a lifetime of energy to resisting something that feels inevitable, that feels as powerful as an empire. Peter and Isaiah I imagine are both also considering David's words;

"The days of a human life are like grass: they bloom like a wildflower; but when the wind blows through it, it's gone; even the ground where it stood doesn't remember it. But the Lord's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now for those who honor him. Psalm 103:15-17"

I hear a similar message in a word of wisdom from the prophetic teacher and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She writes, towards the end of a collection of guidelines for how to be in loving and reciprocal relationship with the Earth,

"Sustain the ones who sustain you and the Earth will last forever" (RWK, p183)"

What does it mean to be God's chosen strangers other than that we have accepted an invitation to be a temporary witness to an eternal truth? The abundance of the natural world that we have been given is as manifest and real an experience of God's love as I have ever known. What does it matter how long we might get to live, if we dedicate at least some of that time to loving our neighbors, our human neighbors and those who make up our ecosystem.

At the close of his letter, the section that Laura read for us, Peter makes this request. In service of loving our neighbor, Peter asks that elders shepherd their communities. He asks that they offer their wisdom and guidance not out of obligation, but out of love. He instructs the elders to eagerly pass along what they have learned to the following generations. In turn he asks that the youth listen to the authority that the elders have to offer. He asks immediately after that, that everyone clothe themselves with humility. The concept of authority is a tricky one, throughout context and culture. In following his instruction to respect the authority of elders with a call towards humility, he is gently reminding both youth and elder that there is plenty to teach each other, and plenty more to learn. He closes his letter with a call for solidarity between fellow peoples, asking them to trust that they do not suffer alone.

The entire missive of first Peter is a call to solidarity. It is instruction to these groups of strangers, asking them to share what they have and to do it with eagerness, generosity, and humility. He is asking specifically for them to share lessons and wisdom, not just material resources. This is the same solidarity we are called to now.

In this moment our enemy, the human beings who wake up, draw breath and choose to oppress and exploit other human beings, are working tirelessly to divide us from ourselves. Through questions of gender, race, sexuality, faith, ethnicity, immigration status, and more we are being taught that our neighbor is our enemy. You, or I, or most people I imagine that we all will meet in our lives,

are not our enemy. What most people we meet are, often, is annoying. Frustrating. Confusing. Even harmful.

The Gospel reading today from John's account of the life of Christ is a rich and moving message. Jesus says to his disciples, hours before his execution by the state, that it is Love that will deliver them. He commands them to "Love each other as I have loved you". This is a call to solidarity that I imagine is part of what inspires Peter to make a similar call in his letter to God's chosen strangers.

At the risk of overstating my point, this is messy work. This kind of love, this kind of solidarity, does not often feel good. The other night, at a party, I made a joking comment about two people with beards, calling them as a pair boys. Only one of them felt respected by that comment, the other did not. It felt weird. I felt bad! And, I pressed on. We, you, I will make choices in our endless effort to try and love well where people end up feeling hurt. Our call is not to perfection. Our call is to a kind of love that has the capacity to rebuild. When Jesus says to his disciples

"There is no greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends",

It is a message with a dual meaning. He is speaking to his coming betrayal and execution, his approaching martyrdom. He is also trying to teach a lesson we continue to miss. As he awaits his coming murder, Jesus offers his disciples the salvation we continue to yearn for. The choice to offer his own life as a sacrifice is a demonstration of His Love. I have come to understand the crucifixion and resurrection as a choice made to set down power. It is someone who could have enforced equity through divine intervention instead offering us the opportunity to create and practice that equity. Through Jesus, God is asking us to love each other, and praying that we will try. And, knowing that the work is messy and full of mistakes, Jesus is freeing us from our own crucifixion. He is enduring our punishment in order to open a door towards forgiveness. That we might learn to set aside punishing ourselves and each other in favor of understanding.

This kind of radical social change, from punishment to collaboration, is the kind of thing that the writer of First Peter knows is exhausting. And yet, our author is calling back to this message of Jesus, giving explicit instructions on what it means to love each other. When Jesus tells his disciples to give up one's life for one's friends, the martyrdom message is clear. What I find to be worth digging a little bit deeper for is that while alive, they can orient themselves towards each other. To prioritize their relationships over their impulses. He is calling back, in a way, to Isaiah and to David, who in their writings about the temporary nature of human life both choose to mention the flower, the bloom. These lives that are so

short continue because of how we spend our time as flowers. What we do with our lives matters, and it is but a piece of the eternal flow of life giving love.

As we continue to survive and resist the onslaught of authoritarian rule, I invite you to help me to practice this love. It is a love I struggle with. This is the kind of love that learns how to say and be told no. It is the kind of love that learns how to give without depleting and receive without taking. The kind of love Jesus invites us towards is the kind of love that persists beyond the annoyance, the inevitable friction of sharing humanity.

We need to learn and practice and fail and practice again the kind of love that tries over and over. Get to know our neighbors. Cultivate our curiosity into an attitude of compassion that outweighs reactionary judgement. Live lives of Love for our friends. This is the effort that will bring heaven onto Earth. It is the ultimate call of Christ's life and work, and is the solidarity that the author of first Peter asks us to show each other. True, deep, real love that is rooted in compassion and emotional generosity.

Take a deep breath with me, breathe in. Breathe out.

I love you.

Amen.