

Next week we are takin' it to the streets. We're going to show our neighbors that the church is a WHO not a WHAT. We're going to bless the people God has assigned for us to bless. I've had a couple of experiences recently that has brought the whole Fellowship Serves initiative into perspective for me. I was in Orlando, Florida, at a store and I overheard an employee approach a man there (who looked like me...tall, dark and handsome! OK, he was a middle-aged white guy.) She said in very broken English, "Escuze me...can I geet someone to help you?" The man replied, "No thanks, just looking." She said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were a foreigner." What came home to me at that moment is that we are becoming a nation of foreigners. This fact poses the greatest opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ in our generation.

The Bible says that every Christ-follower is a foreigner. We are citizens of a far country, a Heavenly City spoken of in Revelation 21:1-5 "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

Peter says we are strangers and aliens on this earth, here for a short time to introduce as many people as possible to the reality of God's eternal kingdom. Over the past couple of centuries, we have been bound together by a common language, a common religion, and common stories about life in America. That's changing fast which became clear in a second experience I had at my local Wal-Mart. I was standing in line on a Sunday night and as I surveyed the various customers in line I realized that I was in the minority. There were no less than four languages I distinctly heard that evening and I was reminded that Dallas is a diverse city in a diverse country becoming increasingly diverse. As we go into our neighborhood we will meet Indians and Africans, Burmese and Chinese, Central Americans and Central Asians, all coming together in this growing city chasing the dream of a better future for their family. If you are young, this diversity is hardly breaking news. If you are older, you may not be happy about it you can't stop it. We are city of exiles, immigrants, refugees, evacuees, all with different cultural backgrounds and different views of reality. How are we, as God's people, to respond to these unchanging realities? Does God's word give us any clues? As a matter of fact, Jeremiah 29 addresses a similar situation. Jeremiah 29:4-14. (I am indebted to Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City for drawing my attention to this passage a couple of years ago. The sermon he preached to his inner city congregation has inspired me.) Let's read the passage...

The background of this text is the exile of the Jews in Babylon. Over a period of twenty years or so King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked the Southern Kingdom of Israel and hauled it's inhabitants into captivity. Finally, in 586 B.C. he had had enough of the Jews and destroyed

Jerusalem and the temple. The Babylonians added a large group of foreigners to their kingdom. How do you deal with a large influx of people who are from a completely different culture? Historically there are three options:

1. You can kill them (or expel them). Just get rid of them. The problem with that policy is that unless you get all of them they tend to get mad and come back to seek revenge. Hitler pursued a policy first of expulsion and then of extermination.
2. You can subjugate them. This is what the Egyptians did with God's people back in the days of Moses.
3. There was a third option. The Babylonians had an interesting policy dealing with the people they conquered - they assimilated them. This was a brilliant plan really. Give the refugees opportunities to move up in society PROVIDED they become just like the Babylonians. If they adopt the Babylonian culture and value the same things the Babylonians value then they can get ahead. You may recall this was the temptation Daniel faced in Babylon.

So how are God's people to respond to this policy? How are they to respond to the pressure to assimilate and surrender their distinctives? Well obviously they could go with the flow and be assimilated. That's what happened to the Northern Kingdom in Assyria. They never do return intact. They were absorbed into the fabric of ancient near Eastern nations never to be seen again.

Another option was tribalism. Many of the Jewish leaders encouraged the people to separate themselves from Babylonian life and just hold out until they could return. They even welcomed false prophecies that the captivity would only last a couple of years. 28:2-3. Jeremiah responds in 29:8-10.

God has a different agenda for His people. It's not assimilation or tribalism. It is a policy of service...vv. 5-7. Those words had to be hard to hear. Not only were the Babylonians immoral but they were brutal. They had killed many of the relatives of these Jewish exiles and now God says to seek the welfare of these people. Imagine a Jewish prophet coming to a group of Jews in 1945 and saying, "Thus saith the Lord, 'Go back into Germany and seek the welfare of the German people.'"

When you read the Bible you are struck by the fact that God regularly places people in a city who are citizens of an alternate city. St. Augustine referred to these two cities as the City of God and the City of Man. The City of Man, the earthly city, is built on a foundation of human pride. It is a place of exhaustion and oppression as people seek a name for themselves. They use the city for their own selfish purposes. There is no rest in the City of Man. Crime and corruption, oppression and injustice are ever-present in the earthly city as the inhabitants exploit one another. In the earthly city power is gained through force or deception.

The Heavenly City is built on a foundation of peace, shalom. It is a place of joy where the citizens don't need to make a name for themselves because they already have a name. They are called by the name of the One they seek to make known. They bear the name of Christ. Citizens of the Heavenly City get power not by seeking power but by serving. Jesus had to explain this to His disciples who only knew the ways of the City of Man...Mt. 20:25-28.

Here's the point - **Citizens of the Heavenly City prove their citizenship by seeking the welfare of their earthly city.** Citizens of the Heavenly City should be the very best citizens of the earthly city.

Reinhard, Ryan, Waldrep met with our local city officials to see how we could partner with them for the good of our community. They were a little surprised. They thought we were asking for them to do something FOR US. It took them a little while to grasp that we were asking what we could do FOR THEM and for our community. When citizens of the Heavenly City seek to serve they gain the attention of the citizens of the earthly city.

One of the explanations for the rise of Christianity in the first two centuries after the resurrection was the response of the Christians to the plagues that swept through the Roman Empire. Christians were the ones who stayed and attended to the needs of the dying. They lived out Hebrews 11:13-16, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them."

I hope you will participate next week. Here is what you can expect:

1. You can expect that some people will not be interested in what we have to offer. To some it will look like a bunch of do-gooders out to feel better about themselves. And why wouldn't they feel this way if all we do is go out and do nice things one day a year. Our hope is to consistently love the people around this area in order to convince them that we are here to stay. I can't wait for the week AFTER next when we open the new Refugee Empowerment Center in the Harvard Square Apartments.
2. You can expect Jesus to go with you. Jesus demonstrated His commitment to the earthly city on the cross. We are serving people in the city for whom Jesus went outside the city so that we (and they) can become citizens of the Heavenly City. Heb. 13:11-16.

Jesus was crucified outside the city so that we could become citizens of the Heavenly City to come and that makes us salt and light in the earthly city that is. Jesus gives us the basis for loving people. I want to challenge you this morning to pray and ask God to give you a love for this city. Pray and ask God to give us a love for our neighbors. We can do loving things and still not love the people. I was reminded of that last week during all the royal wedding hoopla. In case you haven't heard, there was a royal wedding recently. I heard someone recall the wedding 30 years ago between Prince Charles and Lady Diane. Before the wedding reporters shouted to the Prince, "Are you in love your highness?" He got a quizzical look on his face and responded, "I suppose so...whatever that is."

You can get married and not know what love is. You can do nice things for the city and still not love the people in the city. Pray that God will give us His heart for this city. If we can't change our neighborhood what chance do we have of changing the world? The mission of God is to announce to the world that there is a city, a Heavenly City, where good triumphs and God reigns. Our task is to spread this great Good News, to proclaim it all over the city. But an undemonstrated proclamation is not the Gospel. Let's take the Gospel to the streets, in word and in deed.

Ryan is going to come and give us some specifics on how we're going to do that...