



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

A REMINDER OF HOME

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 7, 2018

COMMUNION MEDITATION

Living as an Expatriate

A number of years ago I read an interesting extended feature article in *FORTUNE*, a national business magazine. A team of reporters spread out across the globe to research the experiences of American business people who were on assignment by their companies in other countries. They interviewed men and women working in places like Singapore, Riyadh, Moscow, and Buenos Aires. And the experiences of Americans in these widely different cultures all tended to follow similar patterns.

The “expatriates”—that is, those U.S. citizens living for a time outside their homeland—had many positive things to say about their foreign experiences. At times their travels were exciting and stimulating, as they grappled with new cultures, customs and languages. Other times were not so positive: they were intimidated by such things as crime, government corruption, local customs and “unwritten rules” they couldn’t figure out, and even by hostility directed towards them as outsiders. All of them felt that their personal and professional growth had been enhanced by the challenges of travel and learning to get by in a vastly different culture. But one refrain came through the clearest: they all missed home. In spite of the interesting sights and sounds, and the new friends they made, nothing could replace in their minds and hearts the special place always reserved for their true home, their families and their closest friends.

Many of you have had the opportunity to travel abroad—either for business or for vacations. I suspect that your experiences paralleled those described in the magazine article: at times you felt joy and wonder; at other times, confusion or anxiety. Traveling takes us across the range of emotions. But I would guess that there were times when you wanted to whisper, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, “There’s no place like home.” And when you’re away from home, you can’t help but think about it. It’s in your heart and mind always—the people and the places you left behind.

Scripture

Our scripture text for today is taken from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, chapter 3. And we will find that his words are directed to people who are “expatriates” in a spiritual sense. Let’s see what he says:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:1-3 (NLT)

New Life in Christ

Paul is describing to us how the reality of our situation changes dramatically once we make the momentous decision to become a follower of Jesus. And the actual tense of the verbs he uses makes it clear: it is the past tense. These are things that have happened to us and are now complete and final. He tells us that when we received Christ as our Savior and Lord, powerful things occurred. We were “raised with Christ.” Our old life—that is, our unforgiven and sinful soul—“died.” It is gone forever.

We may not always feel like a totally different person, like one who has already been “resurrected.” We might even feel, as we struggle with sin and temptation and failure, that the old sinful and unredeemed self is very much alive and in the driver’s seat. But from God’s perspective, our redemption has already been accomplished.

Because we are risen with Christ in a spiritual sense, we now belong with Him.

And where is He? In Heaven, “at the right hand of God.” Therefore we have a new home. Heaven is our eternal home, our final destination, the place to which we will all someday return. That means that Earth—even the good old USA, even our comfortable houses and schools and offices—is foreign territory to the Christian. We are like travelers in a foreign country, living for awhile here in another land, but longing one day to return home where we belong.

And so, Paul says, it is natural for our hearts to turn towards our true home. It is natural for us to fix our minds on Heaven and spiritual things, and to think about our Lord often. Knowing that we will ultimately be with Him, we want to live our lives here during our temporary separation from Him in such a way that He would be pleased and proud of us.

Connecting with Home

When the magazine reporters talked with the Americans living overseas, they asked them to share what things helped them the most to get over their homesickness and feel connected to America and those they loved. These were the most frequently-mentioned ways that the expatriates could feel in touch with home:

- 1) **Newspapers, magazines and websites from the U.S.** One man talked about the joys of being able to read the sports news occasionally, to get the baseball and football scores that nobody in Singapore cared about. Others were eager to follow national politics that were ignored in foreign countries. The printed word from back home gave them insight, and kept them in touch.
- 2) **Phone conversations** with the home office, or with family and loved ones. (Probably today we’d add email, Skype, FaceTime or video conferencing, which were not widely used back when the article was written.) The joy of being able to talk, to share their experiences, and to tell folks they cared

about what their lives were like helped to relieve their sense of loneliness.

- 3) **Seeing other people from their homeland.** Whenever Americans ran into each other in public areas, or in business contacts, there was an instant bond. One person who was interviewed talked about making periodic visits to the local U.S. consulate, which hosted monthly gatherings for Americans, just to be able to talk easily and comfortably with people from her culture who could encourage and help her in her efforts to cope in her unfamiliar environment.
- 4) **Familiar food.** Surprisingly, a powerful emotional experience for those living far from home was occasionally being able to enjoy some food from the homeland. “What fun it is to go to a McDonald’s and chow down on a cheeseburger and fries!” one of them commented. Because the tastes and smells of food can be very memorable, eating an American meal brought back deep and satisfying feelings of being connected to their past and their home.

Connecting with Our Spiritual Homeland

Before we close, I’d like to show you how the same principles apply for Christians today—we who, according to Colossians 3, are temporarily living as expatriates on Earth, but who ultimately will return to our Heavenly home. The same things that help American business people feel connected can help us keep our daily connection with God fresh and fulfilling!

- 1) **The written Word from Home.** Like a copy of *USAToday* or a U.S. website, the Bible is a written word to us from our true home. Reading it regularly keeps our minds focused properly. I encourage you, at the dawn of this new year, to set aside a few minutes each day to read the Bible. If you don’t know where to begin, try one of the four biographies of Jesus at the start of the New Testament, and read a chapter a day. The written word connects us with God’s mind.

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- 2) **Conversations home.** We don't need a cell phone or a laptop computer to send messages to our true home in Heaven. All we need is to pray. It's like a phone call home, a chance to talk with our Heavenly Father about everything we're thinking and feeling. Just as daily phone conversations help a husband and wife stay connected when one is traveling on business, so we need to take advantage of the privilege of talking with God daily.
- 3) **Seeing other people from our homeland.** That's what we in the church call "fellowship." You could even picture time at church as being like a consulate from Heaven, placed here on the foreign soil of Earth to be a place of encouragement, help, protection and friendship for Christian expatriates. We need regularly to be able to talk with others who share our values and our same eternal home. What an incredible help and support we can be to one another.
- 4) **Meals from home.** That's what the Sacrament of Communion is. It's a little taste of Heaven, a spiritual meal that communicates with us on the level of our senses and our memories. Just as McDonald's offers a global taste of American food, so Communion is a small sampling of that great eternal feast that awaits us when we finally go home.

As we celebrate the Sacrament today, I encourage you to reflect on the reality of your situation as a Christian. However enjoyable at times this earthly life may be, it is not your final destiny. Heaven is. Let's take the time to thank Jesus for preparing a place for us. And during the times of quiet as this sacred meal is served, let's talk with our Heavenly Father about whatever needs or joys or worries are on our minds. This is a time set aside for us to get connected with Home. ■