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First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
October 14, 2012  
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“A Season of Stewardship:  
Take My Life & Let It Be...”  
II. “Money, Melody, and Mind”

I Peter 3:8-9, 15 (Adapted from the New Revised Standard) “...have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. 9 Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing. ...In your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be ready to give a reason to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

Before there was Twitter, before there was Facebook, before there was group text messaging, there was St. Peter.<sup>1</sup> Why do I say that? Well, the letter that our scripture is from this morning was indeed a forerunner of some of our modern ways of communicating in that unlike some of the letters in the New Testament, it's not written to an individual, it's not even written to a single congregation, but is in fact meant to be a letter that was received more-or-less simultaneously by eight different churches in Asia Minor, what we know as modern-day Turkey. And while “simultaneous” didn't mean then what it means now, it is nonetheless a missive meant to be received at more or less the same time to address more or less the same situation in those churches. It is meant to give all of those churches the same instruction, inspiration, and moral support in some tough times they are undergoing.

But the letter of I Peter, though, is also a perfect illustration of the fact that is always a challenge to interpret and apply a particular verse or teaching simply because the context of life in the first century middle east is just so almost unimaginably different than our context. For example, scholars estimate that upwards of 90% of people then

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<sup>1</sup>I am aware, of course, of the scholarly consensus that 2 Peter was not actually written by Peter and was written much later, probably into the second century. I am also aware of the scholarly disagreement over when 1 Peter was written and whether it could have been written or not by the Apostle Peter. For the sake of brevity, I am leaving those questions un-dealt with in this sermon because I don't think very much hinges, homiletically, on an exposition of those issues.

were illiterate. There was no “middle class” as we know it; a few folks were very rich and pampered and most folks struggled to get by. Infant mortality approached 50% in some places and the typical woman (whose life expectancy was less than forty years) had to bear five children on the average in order to simply maintain the population. Sunday was not the sabbath and churches did not dot every street corner. There were no antibiotics and there is more than one ancient writing that talks of people dying of an infected tooth and amputations caused by infected hangnails. Likewise, there were no pesticides and no irrigation; a drought or insect infestation one summer meant that people might literally starve to death a few months later. Most folks never traveled further than five miles from their homes in their lifetimes and if they did travel they walked, near or far.<sup>2</sup> Even a listing of the jobs that were the most looked-down on and despised in that day and time makes us scratch our heads in puzzlement at some of them and reminds us indeed how different life was; some of those despised jobs were: dog-dung collector, men who organized contests involving pigeons, and doctors.

But there’s a second reason that we have to work at truly applying well the words of Peter to our day and time and it’s an even more important reason. I said earlier that the scholarly consensus is that this letter was Tweeted (or the first century equivalent thereof) in order to encourage and inspire folks in the face of tough times. Now, some have thought that those tough times were persecutions by Imperial Rome, but more and more those who study these things think that the letter was actually written to those in those churches who were undergoing a much more garden-variety but nonetheless very painful experience. What was that painful experience? Well, when new converts to the faith made their profession of belief in Christ, they were suddenly cut off from everything that they had ever known. Imagine with me for a moment that you are a

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<sup>2</sup>I have benefitted in compiling this list from the facts and ideas in Bart D. Ehrman’s The New Testament, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 2004).

brand-new adult Christian in the year 90 in a small town in Asia Minor; here is some of how life changed for you: First, gathering together on a Sunday in the company of other folks was strange since every day of the week had its own particular purported God or Goddess and you had been used to simply going to the temple of whichever God was your patron.<sup>3</sup> Much more troublingly, you were now likely an embarrassment to your family and friends you wondered why you had gone off the deep end. Even your eating setting you apart from your friends and family, for most congregations insisted that you no longer eat meat (I would find this one really hard!) – unless you raised and slaughtered the animal yourself because every piece of meat sold in the market had to first be dedicated to the Emperor and eating such was therefore an act of idolatry. You would be the subject of all kinds of rumors that constantly circulated about Christians in the first two centuries: that you practiced cannibalism, sexual orgies at you “love feasts” (what most congregations called the Lord’s Supper), and, worst of all, that your congregation sacrificed infants as part of its worship services. Now, no matter how ludicrous all that sounds to us, we ought not be too smug when we recall that there are certainly all kinds of vile rumors, particularly and insidiously in this quadrennial season, that get circulated and believed with no evidence whatsoever. In any case, do you begin to see why becoming a Christian in the year 90 in some small town in Turkey was not just one more “lifestyle choice,” but a huge and costly commitment that wrenched you from everything you had ever known, that most likely deeply embarrassed your friends and family, and cut you off from lots of the customs and practices you’d taken for granted – and might even put you at risk from the forces of Roman law that didn’t much care for folks who refused to serve in the army (as almost no Christian would in the first two centuries) or refused to worship the emperor.

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. <http://grantonparish.wordpress.com/2009/01/25/1-peter-chapter-3-verses-15-your-life-message>

And so how does Peter respond to them to inspire and exhort them? Well, I am first most struck with what he does NOT tell them. He does not tell them that their feelings are “okay.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve often found that particular bit of commentary to be really unhelpful. I want to know what I should **do** about my feelings, how to **think** about them. Nor does he simply tell them some 1<sup>st</sup> century version of “buck up.” Again, how often has such an exhortation actually helped you? He doesn’t tell them to break into small groups and talk about their feelings. He doesn’t offer them vapid or troubling cliches like “It’s always darkest before the dawn” or “God never sends you more than you can deal with” because sometimes the dawn doesn’t, in fact, follow darkness and to say that God has willed their pain, hurt, and isolation on them in order to somehow “test” them makes God rather morally dubious. He doesn’t tell them to just “hang in there” because that’s just not helpful either because they’re already grasping onto this new life by the tips of their fingers and falling back into what they knew, back into old habits and relationships had to seem so very attractive sometimes. No, Peter does none of these things but instead Peter tells them how to **think**. Or, more precisely, he tells them that thinking *well* about their faith is the most important and urgent and necessary thing they can do in response to their situation. Did you hear it? It is one of my favorite lines in the scriptures; it was one of the scriptures read at my ordination twenty-seven years ago, it is one of the scriptures that I hope has guided my ministry: **“Always be ready to give a reason to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”**

There’s another way of putting this that I think makes Peter’s point: **Ideas matter**. Ideas matter. What you think about God, about life, about your relationships with your fellow human beings matters. We live in a culture that tells us much too often that it is in fact your “feelings” that are what’s most important and sometimes even

makes the very vapid claim that any feeling that you might have is “valid,” whatever that means. We live in a culture that increasingly has trouble distinguishing the crucial differences between religions and where the name “Christian” has too often been co-opted and captured by the media and too many others to refer to folks who act as if being a “Christian” is to be especially good at hating certain kinds of people. Last week The Pew Forum reported that for the first time Protestants make up less than 50% of the religiously affiliated in this country, but, much more disturbingly the very rapid pace of folks leaving religion behind has accelerated with one in five adults now saying they are not an adherent of any religion – and for those under 30, it’s one in three!<sup>4</sup> And more and more and more the reason these folks are joining the ranks of the “nones,” as sociologists call them, is that they are more and more disappointed and even disgusted with how so many religious folks, so many Christians, even so many churches seem to spend so much energy and time and passion on denigrating and even demonizing certain kinds of folks or folks who believe in certain ways.

In other words, our time turns out to be not quite as different from Peter’s time as we thought. Because the reason so many folks are turning away from Christianity today is because, like those folks in ancient Asia Minor, they too are too often believing things about the faith, about God, that you and I know to be false. Those early Christians didn’t sacrifice infants and likewise we know as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians that God is love unconditional and unbounded, not a mean and petty and spiteful deity who takes delight in bashing certain folks. Those early Christians didn’t, in fact, engage in orgies at the Lord’s Table, and likewise we know as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians that the church – this church – is open and welcoming to every sort and shape and kind, whether you have been a believer for 80 years or whether this is your first time in a

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

church, whether you are tatoood or pierced, dressed in a suit or clad in cut-offs, whether you are Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative – even Texans are welcome in God’s church!

In other words, what we are called to do in our day is exactly what Peter was calling the Christians in his day to do: to tell folks with clarity and passion and respect and gentleness about the truth of a God of unconditional and amazing love in the face of world that too often doesn’t know that, that too often thinks, as I have said before, that the word “Christian” means banal, bigoted, and boring. Peter says – and we say – No! that’s NOT the truth, that’s not the God we know, that is not the Christ who invited all to come to Him. That’s the idea that matters, that’s the idea that matters hugely because there are too many folks out there who are spiritually starving, who are hungrily hurting, who are hopeless or hapless in the face of life’s hard things. And too often they think that a church is the last place they might find solace. But we know otherwise, and we are called to tell folks, to give a thoughtful accounting, a reason for the hope that is in us, that fills us, that animates us, that delights us, that strengthens us. How? Well, how many of you are carrying in your wallets or purses a few of those “church member business cards” that can be found in the narthex or at the Welcome Center, the ones that say *“Where you won’t be judged, where you won’t be told what you ‘have to believe,’ where all are truly welcome”*? If you aren’t carrying those, I want to ask you do so. We printed some more this week so we’d have all we needed for today. And I want you to have them ready to give to someone when the opportunity arises. It might be just the “reason for hope” that they have been needing.

What else? Well, you may have wondered how this sermon was going to ever going to get to the topic of stewardship (or maybe you hoped it wouldn’t!) Well, these things I’ve mentioned like the “church business cards” are something that I hope each one of you will use in those moments that God puts in front of you. But we can do

more, and the way we do more is by doing together as a whole church what none of us can do nearly so effectively by ourselves. Just this week I had the latest of what are now more and more regular conversations with someone who found this church and told me – as so many do – *“I can’t believe there is a church like this. I thought I’d never find a church where I could truly feel at home again. Thank you.”* And I said, “Don’t thank me, thank the wonderful folks of this congregation who know that God is a God of gentleness and grace and love unbounded – and who give in so many ways of their time and their expertise and their money to make sure that this church can continue its witness through its building, its music, its staff, its programs, its fellowship, and its outreach.”

And that’s true. Without those things, we couldn’t do for the sake of God’s mission of radical hospitality all that we are able to do. For that, I thank each and every one of you. But I also will offer you a note of challenge as well. If you are energized and excited by what God is doing through us to share in our day the good news of the grace of God just as Peter did in his day, if you take joy in all the folks who are finding us and finding out that church indeed doesn’t mean banal, bigoted, or boring, then I invite you to prayerfully and urgently consider this week how you will respond to the opportunity to make your financial commitment for those ministries in 2013. I hope that you will join me in increasing your giving. Every little bit helps. Even small increases help and are signs that you want this ministry to continue to be blessed. Your giving is a tangible way that you can show indeed that you delight in the opportunity to “account for the hope that is within you.” So, on this day when we ask *“Take my life and let it be.... **WHAT?**”* the answer can be, in the words of the title of this sermon, *“a life which indeed praises God with our minds, our melodies and our money!”* Will you sing about it with me? Hymn number 609, verses 3 and 4.