

One of my all time favorite television programs was/is MASH. If you are acquainted with the show you know Major Winchester. Major Winchester was a Boston “blue” blood. He thought he was superior to everyone else and often told others so. He did not feel he should be in Korea, in a MASH unit and he certainly should not have to associate with those beneath his social status, which was just about everyone. He felt his birth status earned him certain favors and privileges that others should or could not enjoy. He was the exception and not the norm.

So, who do you think you are? Now this may seem like a strange question. Yet, has not the church often taken on a superior status in relationship to the rest of the world? There are those who feel Christians are better than others. They feel Christians have a special status in the world. Thus, because of this special status they should not have to endure illnesses, poverty, suffering, trials and tribulations. After all we are God’s chosen. Some have adopted a “theology of privilege” – a special status that puts them over and above everyone else.

I only met her once and that was enough. I did not need to meet her again. She was a “privileged” Christian. She thought her status was superior to all others in the congregation and in the town where she lived. If she came to worship and there was not an empty pew she would return home. No one was worthy to sit with her. She was a great advertisement for what a Christian should not be!

Why bring this up? Why mention this? Because, for me, this is one of the issues Peter is addressing in his letter to the church. We are first and foremost people, citizens of the world. Our standing as a Christian is a lifestyle not a privileged status.

Now, I chose the passage in Daniel as a contrast to the one from Peter. The saving of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was an exception and not the norm. We would like to think it as the norm, but it wasn’t. The writer to Hebrews notes, “...*Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them*” (Heb. 11:35b-38a NIV). Yes, God does sometimes intervene dramatically in history but this is the exception and not the norm. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are willing to stand firm in their faith regardless of the outcome. We read a few verses before the ones already read, “*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up’*” (Daniel 3:16-18).

The deliverance of these three from the furnace of fire is the exception and not the norm. They were willing to be the norm not the exception. The church was not very old when Stephen became its first martyr.

Peter is saying that our status as Christian does not bring us any special earthly honor or privileges. The trials and tribulations the church is experiencing in Peter's day are not to be unexpected. It is hard being a person of faith. The mere identification of being a Christian is enough to bring death. This was not what they had signed on for. Why am I in prison? My only crime is being a follower of Christ. Peter is calling the church to not be ashamed of what trials and tribulations come from following Christ. Christian does not mean privilege or status. His word is that they endure whatever comes as they continue their life in Christ.

This is counter to the popular western theology that Christianity brings power and status. Often in this nation we equate our Christianity to our national identity. I want to thank Newt Gingrich for his recent statement, "I am not a citizen of the world." This highlights the point I am hoping to make. I hope he is not referring to being a citizen of the world in a Christian context because if he is, then he is wrong! We are citizens of the world. Being one in Christ means being one with brothers and sisters wherever they are in the world. Nationality should not be a part of our Christian community. The world is full of non-American Christians. Diane and I spent four years working with wonderful Christians in the Philippines. They were as committed to the church and their faith as are many American Christians. There are Muslims Christians in the world today who are under severe persecution, the kind Peter is speaking of, simply because they are Christian. They too are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are one and we need to be standing with them. We are citizens of the world in Christ!

The older I grow and the more I read and study Scripture the more and more convinced I am that the focus of Scripture is on our relationships. I Peter is dealing with our relationship with one another. Paul dealt with our relationships with one another in his writings. And the Gospels demonstrate to us Christ's relationships with the world. The Scriptures deal with our relationships with God and with one another. We are called to be change agents in the world. The world often does not want to be changed but why should it when it sees how we have acted. We are called to be servants but act as masters. We are called to be inclusive but often work on excluding. We are called to love but often foster hate. The list grows as we begin to see what we have been called to be and how we fail to live up to that calling.

Who do you think you are? Who do you think we are?

There is a wonderful definition of evangelism: **One beggar telling another beggar where they found bread.** I watched Kate Kitterage: All American Girl the other day. It is the story of a young girl growing up in the depression. She makes friends with the hobo community and they share with her the signs, markings of their community. A certain mark on a fence post means there is a sandwich or a meal to be found here. Another mark means keep away. Not all are happy with her association with this group. How could she befriend ones such as these? Is not the hobo community being evangelists to one another: One beggar telling another beggar where they found bread?

We are the ones who have the living bread, the living water. Our call is to share the bread and water of life freely to those who would come. Our call is not to gain superiority over others. Our call is not to bring crusades to the world, forcing people to believe. We cannot force people into God's kingdom but we can love them in. I wonder what mark would be outside our doors.

Peter's message is one we often don't want to hear. We are just like everyone else. Christians will still get sick, lose our jobs, experience trials and tribulations in this life. The only difference is that we have hope of a new and better tomorrow. And until then we support, uplift and encourage one another. We are one beggar telling another where they found grace, hope and love.

Major Winchester believed his birthright gave him certain privileges others did not possess. He could not see anyone as his equal. It is too bad that this is the stance many in the Christian community have adopted, especially American Christians today. (The past has seen others adopted this stance: the Crusades, the Inquisition for example.) Peter reminds us that we are to be faithful to our Lord, "*while continually doing good*" (4:19).

We need to hear and heed again the words of the Prophet Micah (6:8):

*"He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989  
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1984