

January 3, 2010  
The Federated Church of Hyannis  
Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

### **CHOSEN – AGAIN**

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Ephesians 1:3-14

Late summer I returned to my home town of Cleveland for the funeral of a beloved cousin, one who had helped me through my most formative years. It gave me the opportunity to spend time with my cousins and their children, to share the stories of where we have come from and where we are now. I am one of the youngest of 24 cousins, and they have longer memories of the past and I learned of things I never knew. And I found myself driving by the homes in which I had grown up and it was a great sense of reconnecting with home.

As part of that trip I stopped by the church where I grew up and was confirmed and where I was ordained. That was 40 years ago this May and I did not know if I would meet anyone I had known or someone who remembered my parents. My father was a trustee and moderator and chaired two church building campaigns. My mother served on the church staff for almost 20 years and there was a lovely picture of her in their narthex. I wanted to see the picture but instead I saw a metal screen blocking the opening – the kind you see in big cities on glass store fronts.

This church is located in one of the nicer suburbs of Cleveland but at some point took on a fortress mentality. Once I was able to get past this metal screen I learned that they redecorated and my mother's picture was taken down and the secretary had no idea where it was but she would be sure to have the pastor get in touch with me, which he has not. My home church was no longer home and I felt more alienation than connection.

This fall I returned to my college alma mater for the first time since I graduated in 1965. There were many reasons for this return, but at the heart of it I wanted to go back home, back to the place and time where I went from a lost and lonely high school student who barely graduated to a focused and prepared college student ready for graduate school. I wanted to better understand how I got from there to here.

One of the first people to greet me was the man who served as registrar when I was admitted who recognized me and called me by name and I was surprised by people who knew who I am even though I have been gone for decades. And to my shock there was a woman whom the college honored that weekend for her church work in Cleveland fondly my ministry in Cleveland decades before – more than making up for my home church which redecorated my mother's picture into oblivion.

Christmas is a time of reconnecting. I know how much Elise and I appreciate the many cards we have received. I usually wait until after Christmas to sit down and read them all over again and savor the sentiments and revel in recollections and thank you all very much. Christmas is also a time we can be acutely aware of connections that are missing. We think back to those who have gone before us in death, to those with whom we once shared Christmas who are gone to be with God and whom we will see this side of death only in pictures and in memory.

As life unfolds there are those we long to be with but for whatever reason cannot. Our youngest son is off in North Dakota on an Air Force Base guarding us from the Canadians and caribou, and doing a very good job of it. He emailed us a picture on Christmas Day that was hard to decipher. I called and said we got the email and it looked like snow with little bumps on the surface and what are those? Cars, he explained, cars, with snow up to the rooftops. And he spoke as one who feels he has had been sent into exile.

Those to whom Jeremiah wrote were taken into exile after they kept putting their trust in guns and government, in silver and sensuality to be their savior. These were Jewish people whose major sin was idolatry, burning incense to other gods and worshipping what the god offered them, which often was prosperity, a fruitful harvest, or a blessing of sexual misbehavior. It is not unlike what many hold as of highest value today – financial prosperity and sex that is outside the bounds of marriage.

Jeremiah reminded them that the prospect of a future rests on the word of God and not on political leaders or military maneuvers or financial success. They were not going to return as heroes or from a self-directed journey. It was a return from a forced expulsion, from a punishment from an exile of God's choosing. Those returning include the most vulnerable members of community: the blind, the lame, and pregnant women. On their journey God promised to sustain the needy delegation, leading them by brooks of water

and on level ground. It was coming home because God who first made them the chosen people has chosen them all over again.

We tend to be wanderers. We leave; we go away maybe by choice but often by chance. And the leaving can be very exciting or frightening or beneficial or helpful, but it is a leaving. And so much of life is a desire to return to home, where we are loved, to find out who and what has made up who we are. And we get into endless trouble when we are lost.

The lost want nothing more than to return home again. Ian Lewis, 43, of Standish, Lancashire, England, was interested in finding out about his family. He spent thirty years tracing his family tree back to the seventeenth century. He traveled all over Britain talking to 2,000 relatives about the family tree. He even planned to write a book about how his great-grandfather left to seek his fortune in Russia and how his grandfather was expelled after the Revolution.

Then, after doing all that research, Ian Lewis made a discovery that stopped him in his tracks. He discovered he had been adopted. By birth, he was not a Lewis at all. He was adopted when he was a month old and his real name was David Thornton. And so Ian Lewis, AKA David Thornton, went back to square one. He started his family research all over again in light of his newly discovered adoption.

Paul said we have been adopted as God's children through Christ. Once we were abandoned, alone, parent-less, and purpose-less. But then by the grace of God we have been brought into a new family in Christ. There are no biological Christians. In Christ we become children of God. In God's great realm there are no stepchildren, there are no illegitimate children, because each of us is a child of God "in Christ." We are chosen. We may have wandered away only to discover we have been chosen all over again.

Paul said this is all "according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will." We are, in church language, predestined to be adopted by God. Which reminds me of how one pastor described the difference between Methodists and Presbyterians like this: "The Presbyterian church is Calvinistic. It believes in predestination, that is, that everything which is going to happen was planned by the Almighty at the beginning of time, and that we cannot alter the divine plan. The Methodist church, on the contrary rejects predestination. By this I mean the Methodists

believe that when anything happens, the Almighty is just as surprised as anybody else.”

Predestination does not mean that our life is pre-planned and there is nothing we can do about it. Predestination is about the love of God. God, long before we were born, destined us to be adopted because God is love and God has plans for us as God’s children. And when we stray he calls and tells us yet again that we are his chosen ones.

In our community there is a lot of concern about wanderers, those without a home, those who do not have a permanent address, those who cannot reach into their pockets and pull out a set of keys to where they live. There are also so many who have a permanent address and keys to the place where they live but they do not feel they are home. We long for what was stated in the opening song of the TV show Cheers: To go where everybody knows your name and they’re always glad you came.

We all desire to be wanted, to be precious, to be chosen. Genesis through Revelation tells of humanity wandering off and God calling us back time and again. We can live in exile away from God or we can rejoice in God leading us back. We will return with all our human failures because God loves us as we are, not as we think we are. It is for us, in the words of St. Paul to praise his glory now and forever. God chose us and God chooses us again and again and again.