

Sermon for Proper 14 C  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham  
August 8, 2010

When our daughters were five years old, their dad sat them down and said, “Karin and Rebecca, mom and I have something important to tell you. You aren’t really from here—you were born on the Red Planet, Mars. We are actually Martians. Karin, your name is Zortron; Becca, yours is Mugawatz; Mom’s is Q, mine is W, and Ruah’s (the dog’s) is !thbpt!.” Far from being upset, the girls were delighted with this information and immediately went and told their best friend Megan. Later they told their teachers and everybody in school. It’s a wonder we weren’t reported to DSS (the Department of Social Services). It was only six months later that Eric told them that it wasn’t true, they were actually humans. By then, they were so convinced of their Martian heritage that they refused to believe that they were not actually born on the Red Planet.

When they are 30, they will no doubt be in therapy about this. And though it is not, of course, true that we are Martians, there was some deeper truth to the story, which may have been one of the reasons they so readily believed it. And the truth is that we were a strange family. Both of their parents are pastors, so Sunday mornings meant that we were all going to church for a long time, usually 5 hours. We didn’t own a TV, so they missed out on a lot of TV culture that other children were exposed to. Instead, they were avid readers. We forced them to play outside frequently, sometimes even bodily hauling them out and shutting the door. And from age 1½, Becca had severe food allergies, so they had a special restricted diet for years. Finding out about their Martian heritage, then, made sense of the fact that our family was different from many others.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer points out that people of faith are aliens, strangers and exiles on the earth. Like my family, people of faith don’t quite fit in, and the author cites person after person, heroes of faith, who lived here, but were always seeking a homeland not of this life. Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants lived on earth, but also were on a journey towards their true homeland, which is life with God. The point for the writer is that Christians are part of that heritage—as people of faith, we live with a foot in each world—earthly society and life with God. At the time of the writing, many Christians were undergoing persecution and hardship, and some were turning away, because the life of faith was difficult. Perhaps they couldn’t see any point, any advantage in being Christians, because other people seemed to have such a better or easier life than they. The author of the letter is saying, “No wait! The life of faith is about being kind of strange and not fitting in, but it’s worth doing, because it’s a better, richer life. Not only that, you have lots and lots of company, people past and present who have all walked this path and are still walking it with you. Hang in there! Your journey is worth doing!”

That’s still a very good message for us. We Christians are or should be aliens, hanging out on the blue planet, but not quite residents. Passing through for a time. Our real home is on the mother ship, the community of believers, wherever we find them. That mother ship eventually will escort us home to God.

One of the characteristics of this alien community is that it is not focused on possessions and money. Jesus says, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom (the permanent homeland with God). Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in heaven that does not fail.” One of the biggest pressures in modern American society is to accumulate possessions and money—cars, houses, flat screen TVs,

electronics, stocks, IRAs, life insurance. Followers of Christ are invited to change priorities—to put relationships first—to God, to others—and money and possessions second. He isn't necessarily saying, "Have no possessions," but saying, "Whatever you have, use it for the kingdom, to build up relationships." Keep the money flowing, keep the energy flowing. Sell your stuff, give away to the poor. Seek out God and use what you are given to make more goodness and godness around you.

There are at least two ways this attitude is helpful—it allows you to use what you have for good, not just sit on a pile of it. Sometimes if you hold on to something—a book, a couch, some food—by the time you get around to giving it away it has spoiled or rotted or gone out of fashion. If you give away what you have that you are not using, you allow it to produce good right now, to increase your relationship with someone else, and God smiles. The second thing is how good it is for us to give. It keeps our lives lean and open, and encourages us to rely on God to provide what we need. Then, to, when we receive, we recognize that our bounty comes from God and not our own efforts, and gratitude grows in us. Then we have right priorities—our life with God first, life with others second, and life with possessions last.

Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have convinced 40 billionaires to sign the Giving Pledge. This pledge states that they will give over half of their wealth away to charitable causes. The two founders of the Pledge are worth over \$90 billion—so having tens of billions of dollars left still means they have more than they can ever spend. But what a great attitude—"I will give away more than half my wealth." This is a step in the direction that every Christian should be taking. Only ours is: "I will give away or use everything I have to build up relationships with God and others." By the way, that doesn't mean we neglect ourselves, because we are most use to God if we are also physically and spiritually healthy. We are called to look for ways to give away percents of what we have.

The present economy upheavals are actually an opportunity to embrace generosity. It is a well-documented fact that the more money you have, the less you give. People who make \$10,000 a year give away an average of 11%, while people who make over \$100,000 give away only 3% of their income. That's because people who are poorer know the value of using what they have for relationships, not storing things up for later.

As aliens, our call is to give away all we can for God's sake. Not accumulate everything we can for our own sake or for the sake of the American economy. We do best at this when we are nurtured and supported in this odd way of life by our fellow aliens on the Christian mother ship. The more we step out in faith and give, the more we are supported in this lifestyle by our shipmates, the more gratitude and faith grow within us, the stronger relationships come, the richer our life is.

Today Kaidyn Costa will step aboard the alien mother ship of Christ. He will join us in our journey as strangers and exiles—in the world but not of it. We can help him grow up to know God, to trust in God's abundance, and to put relationships first—to God, to others, to our beautiful and vulnerable planet—and to shape him so that he is quick to use his abilities, his possessions, his gifts in increasing this community of life and joy.

Welcome Kaidyn. Join us, your odd and interesting companions, on an exciting and unexpected journey, more rich and fulfilling than you can imagine.

Amen.