

Third Sunday of Easter (Year A, RCL)

LIVING AS SOJOURNERS IN A STRANGE LAND (1 Peter 1:17-23)

By Onleilove Alston

I am a part of a sojourning people, a diaspora people. Taken from Nigeria to toil on the Alston plantations of America my Hausa ancestors migrated to Nigeria from the Middle East according to scholars. In the 1960's my maternal grandparents left North Carolina and eloped on the way to Brooklyn, New York. They were a part of the millions who left the south for northern cities in the Great Migration. Though we call New York City our home we are a part of a great diaspora of people taken from the continent of Africa as slaves in the trans- Atlantic slave trade.

In our Scripture passage, Peter encourages us to live our time here as sojourners with reverent fear, remembering the sacrifice that was made for us. What does it mean to be a sojourner? It means that you are temporarily traveling through a place and as people of faith we must remember that we are temporary residents of our respective countries because we are permanent residents of the Kingdom of God. The Apostle Peter opens his pastoral letter "to the elect who are sojourners of the dispersion," these were Hebrews who were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire and even to the four corners of the earth.

When you are a sojourner you may never feel at home but you know you have a home. Who are the sojourners and the dispersed today? We must remember the "3 million refugees who have been resettled in the United States since Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which created the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program and the current national standard for the screening and admission of refugees into the country." Let us consider the reality of refugees in the United States. The Pew Research Forum collected these key facts about refugees to the U.S. on January 30, 2017. These 3 million refugee sojourners should be welcomed and yet in our current political environment they are being shut out.

Let us remember these refugees from across their world and their need for sanctuary as ICE agents roam our communities capturing friends and family as modern day slave catchers. How are we to welcome these sojourners in our midst? If we remember the welcome that God gave to us as we sojourned through life to spiritually connect to the divine, we will treat these modern-day Sojourners with hospitality and love providing sanctuary for those who are hunted by a broken immigration system.

People of faith forget that we are just sojourners here, but instead we are permanent residents of the Kingdom of God. When we forget this, we bow down to the idols of patriotism and nativism failing to love our family members dispersed across the world. As people of faith, we have to ask ourselves where does our loyalty reside with one country or with the Kingdom? Now, I am very

tied to my culture and community, but I also know that I have brothers and sisters in the spirit residing in the four corners of the earth. As the Apostle Paul writes, if one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. We must be balanced in our love towards our neighbors next door and towards our neighbors across the world.

Questions:

1. How would our ministry and activism change if we embraced our status as sojourners instead of citizens of one nation?
2. What empty ways of life have you inherited from your ancestors- racism, sexism, selfishness, etc.? How can you renew your mind to end the practice of these ways?
3. How can standing in solidarity with immigrants and refugees help us embrace our citizenship in the Kingdom of God?

Onleilove Alston writes and lectures on the implicit bias of colorism and its impact on African American women. The former executive director of PICO-Faith in New York, Onleilove is a minister, faith-based organizer, speaker, and writer. She is a contributing writer for Sojourners magazine, The Black Commentator, HuffPost Religion, and NPR's OnBeing blog. Having experienced poverty and homelessness, she has developed a compassion for people fueled by her passion for justice, and knows that the gospel is truly "good news to the poor." In April 2019, her first book "Prophetic Whirlwind: Uncovering the Black Biblical Destiny" was published, and she works with Hebrew tribes in Africa. She lives in Harlem, New York City and serves as a minister at Beth El the House of YHWH. Learn more about her work at PropheticWhirlwind.com.

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On Thursday March 16th, 2017, I joined 26 faith leaders of various races and faith traditions to block traffic in front of the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) court and we prayed for New York City to be a true sanctuary city for our sojourning sisters and brothers. We were arrested as we prayed and chanted. We spent about 7-hours in jail. We realized we were just sojourning through the prison system but that our immigrant and incarcerated brothers and sisters didn't just sojourn through the system. They remain in the system locked away due to political dysfunction, classism and racism. As believers, we aren't called to hold our citizenship in any nation above our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. We are called to welcome the stranger and called to provide sanctuary to the sojourners -- realizing that regardless of borders, walls, bans or political climate, we are family united by the spirit. Remembering the words of the Apostle Peter to the sojourning Hebrews dispersed due to Roman occupation:

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart."

Sincere love during these times means offering sanctuary for the sojourner, risking our congregations, and even putting our bodies on the line knowing that our true citizenship is in the Kingdom where no one is illegal but all are loved.

Reflection Questions:

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