

THE POWER OF US

Remember Who We Really Are

Text: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Do We Know Who We Really Are?

There is an unforgettable scene in the stage production of Victor Hugo's, *Les Miserables*, in which a ragtag band of aspiring revolutionaries prepares to do battle for justice and liberty against the army of a cruel monarch. As the moment of confrontation rushes toward them, a wave of doubt and fear sweeps over the tattered crew, threatening to turn them back from their cause. Suddenly, one of the rebels cries out a challenge that galvanizes the freedom fighters and spurs them on with fresh courage. "My friends," he cries, "The time has come for us to find out who we really are!"

The question I have for you today is: Do you know who YOU really are? If the government rescinded your citizenship or a disaster destroyed your family or a wildfire consumed your home, who would you be? If your job was taken away or your bank account was liquidated or your face was disfigured, who would you be? When all the positions and possessions and physical qualities that society uses to define us are finally taken away, as they are slowly stripped from us all, who are we then? Do you and I have an identify that is unchangeable and unimpeachable? Have we found out who we really are?

We Are A Chosen People

In one of our scripture lessons for today, the Apostle Peter strives to help us remember who we are. It is almost like he foresaw that in the excessively individualistic, consumer-driven, superficial world of the twenty-first century, Christians would tend to lose sight of their true identity. And so Peter takes pains to supply us with three vivid descriptions of it that I invite you to really ponder and let settle deep within you today. I pray that come what may you will always remember that **"you are,"** FIRST and foremost, **"a CHOSEN people... God's special possession..."** or, as another translation puts it, **"a people belonging to God"** (1 Peter 2:9).

It is quite something to be chosen, isn't it? When I was a child, I knew I was NOT -- at least not out on the elementary school playground -- that battlefield where the struggle for self-esteem often turns upon being selected as part of a kickball team. I suppose it didn't help that I wore my hair in a Three Stooges bowl-cut, or sported buck teeth like a woodchuck, or wore these thick tortoise-shell glasses! The result was that I sat the kickball games out alot of the time or was exiled to the distant outfield with the other awkward boys if I were lucky. Until the day when Dave Joaquim moved to town.

Dave was a big, dark-eyed, tough-looking kid who lived in an apartment over the Mobil station. His family was poor. But in the ranks of grade school boys, Dave was

a being of the highest order – a virtual god on the kickball field. That guy could throw harder and run faster than anyone else. He could kick the ball clear over the school fence, at will. And for some reason I will never understand -- call it an example of grace in blue jeans -- Dave Joaquim always picked ME, first, to be on his team. That guy changed my life. That simple, irrational act of choosing unworthy me would start a slow process of growing confidence, and willingness to strive, and a desire to give other people a break, that was life-changing. I know it sounds silly, but that is what Dave's grace did.

On an infinitely greater field, it was that sort of influence Peter was pointing to when he said: "**Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have**" (1 Peter 2:10). Peter says this as if it was the most identity-securing, life-changing fact about us. And it is. The most staggering authority in the Universe has looked across the field of possible candidates, and for equally mysterious reasons has chosen you to bring into existence; chosen you to endow with resources unparalleled in human history; chosen you to come and die for; chosen you to call into the membership of the longest existing, longest-winning team in history, the Church of Jesus Christ. Life may take away your looks, your lovely home, and your fancy car. People may fire you from your job, divorce you, reject you, laugh at you if they will. But in the end it will not cancel the ultimate truth about you. You have been chosen!

We Are A Royal Priesthood

It is equally important, however, that you remember that this choosing was for a purpose. It was to send you out on the field to play a particular position. You have been chosen -- as Peter reminds us **SECONDLY** -- to be part of a "**royal priesthood**" (1 Peter 2:9). In his book, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Leo Tolstoy helps us to remember how important that role is. Faced by his imminent death from cancer, a formerly pompous public figure is forced to finally re-examine his life. "What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, simply was not the real thing?" wondered Ilyich. Suddenly "it occurred to [Ivan] that what had seemed utterly inconceivable before -- that he had not lived the kind of life he should have -- might in fact be true. It occurred to him that those scarcely perceptible impulses to protest what people of high rank considered good, vague impulses which he had always suppressed, might have been precisely what mattered, and all the rest not been the real thing"**[1]** at all.

Who guards "the real things" of life? Who points others to the values that matter most, and tells the stories that preserve these truths, and helps people make wise choices before it is too late? Popular culture will not serve this function for us. The evening news will display for us the latest dismal turn of events, the current antics of some celebrity, and the inevitable "and now this" from some sponsor who tells us that what's missing from our life is merely some variety of breakfast cereal.**[2]** But popular culture will not tell us where history began, what's going wrong, and how it can be fixed.

The schools will teach us to keep our cubbies clean, and that it's not good to cheat

on tests, but most of the time they will not teach the world about repentance or grace or God's more abundant way of living. The government will establish laws and do its best to cope with dilemmas over the allocation of social resources, but it will not tell the world what justice looks like, nor provide any compelling reason why the well-to-do might actually choose to make sacrifices in order to meet the needs of the poor.

But, then, it is not the job of the media, schools, or government to tell a story which makes sense of life or points to the real things of ultimate value. That is the job of those chosen to be royal priests. It isn't a job confined to guys in robes on Sundays. It is the job of anyone who -- as Peter proclaims -- has been **"called out of darkness into God's wonderful light."** If you are a follower of Jesus, it is your job to help the people around you see life by that light. Are you taking that part of your identity seriously?

James Ayers suggests that: "Most people we come into contact with have heard the words of the gospel before, perhaps many times. The words by themselves are not convincing...People must see and hear how the gospel works in our lives. How does our faith help us when we feel successful and proud and ready to gloat? How do we act when our good intentions haven't kept us from getting angry and saying words we immediately regret? How does knowing Jesus help us when we are tempted to tell a little lie that we hope no one will ever find out about?"[3] In other words, you may not wear a visible crown or collar, but you are a royal priesthood. God chose you to reveal to others what the "real values" are and what a beautiful difference it makes when someone lives by them.

We Are A Holy Nation

Let me summarize what I've said and move to a close. Christians have an identity that is the central energizing reality of their lives because they know, first and foremost, that they have been chosen by God, and that gives them a new confidence for living. They know secondly, that they have been chosen to be God's royal priests in the world, and that gives them a new content or purpose for living. And finally, Christians know they have been chosen as royal priests of a **"holy nation,"** and this gives them a dramatic new context for living.

Duke University scholars, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, put it this way: "The greatest challenge facing the church in any age is the creation of a living, breathing, witnessing colony of truth... to form a community... which is so shaped by our convictions that no one even has to ask what we mean by confessing belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[4]

What the writers are confessing here is that it is challenging to be the Church in the way that Jesus intended us to be. The temptation is always there for me to start thinking that Christian faith is primarily about ME having been chosen by God and about ME having been commissioned as a priest to represent the values of God. From there it is a really short hop to thinking that Church is mainly about me. But if we've woken up to who we really are, then we no longer think in such

individualistic terms at all. Our whole way of looking at life is now shaped by a God who is community in himself – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. We stop viewing the crowd in this building as just another gathering of individuals. Now we see one another for who we really are -- **“a holy nation”** – literally, a “community belonging to God.”

We start realizing that if we all made a commitment to get to know, encourage, support, and pray for one another an amazing power for life-change would fill this place. We imagine the powerful influence God could have through us if we were all out there simultaneously living by his kingdom’s values in our homes and neighborhoods, schools and workplaces. We begin pondering the stunning impact we could have if we united more of our resources to serve needs together. We become awestruck by God at work in and through one another, and others become fascinated by **the Power of Us.**

It was like that once, you know. In the year 129 A.D., a man named Quadratus wrote a letter to a religious skeptic named Diocletus. In his letter he described a remarkable people with whom he had become enraptured. This is what Quadratus wrote: "They cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language. Yet, although they follow the customs of the country in clothing, food, and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They are poor, and yet they make many rich. They are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. When they are affronted, they still pay due respect. To put it simply, Diocletus: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. It is to no less a post than this that God has ordained them, and they dare not try to evade it." [5]

Friends, it is time to remember who we really are. I believe you know it in your heart. You have been chosen to be a royal priest of a holy nation – nothing less than the Kingdom of God itself. It is to no less a post than this that God has ordained you and me and everyone else here. So let us not evade it.

Please pray with me... O God our King, confirm in our hearts our true identity --the knowledge of who and Whose we really are. Remind us, that those You call into ministry You bless with uncommon power to fulfill Your mission. Touched by the reality of your Kingdom, send us forth to plant new colonies of its character in every place and relationship to which we go. For we pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Benediction

When troubles come and progress seems slow, may the voice of the Father ring in your heart, saying: **"I have chosen**

you!"

When your purpose becomes clouded and you've lost the way, may the voice of the Son enlighten your mind, saying: **"You are my royal priest."**

When your love for people flags and you want to walk away, may the voice of the Spirit sing in your soul, saying: **"You are a holy nation."**

Thus may the Lord bless and keep you, making you a blessing to Him and all you meet. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

[1] Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, pp. 126-27.

[2] Thanks for this insight to Neil Postman's, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

[3] From a sermon by the Rev. James Ayers, First Presbyterian Church of Kingman, KS.

[4] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, pp. 123; 170-71.

[5] "The Letter to Diocletus," *Library of Christian Classics: Volume 1*, pp. 216-218.