

God's Special People - The Church

I Peter 2: 4-10

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Picture a young family in a restaurant, Mom, Dad, and an 8 year old boy. The waitress comes to receive their order. The parents give their orders and the Mom says, "The *boy will have a hamburger and a glass of milk*" Rather sheepishly, the boy says, "*I was thinking about a hot dog and a chocolate milk shake.*" After a while the waitress returns and places in front of the boy a hot dog and milkshake. The boy says, "*Golly, she thinks I'm somebody!*"

In a much more profound way, this kind of affirmation is what Peter is trying to communicate to struggling, persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. You are somebody, you are unique. Once you were nothing and nobody but now you are God's own special people. Living stones built into strong house with Christ as the cornerstone. A holy people, called out of darkness into the light. Receivers of mercy who declare God's marvelous deeds to those who long for mercy. A royal priesthood. You understand that the Latin word for priest is pontifex...which means bridge-builder. In other words, we are privileged to point people to Jesus Christ, who is the great high priest, whose life, death and resurrection provides the way, the bridge, to the living God. Indeed, you are somebody!

This is a word of encouragement and direction that God's people always need to hear, but perhaps especially now. We live in a culture that is increasingly secularized and scornful of, even hostile to of the unique claims of Christianity. I quote from a blog "*In American culture you are free to be a Christian as long as you don't actually live out your faith, take a stand in relationship to your faith, or believe others should embrace your faith. In other words, it can be privately engaging, but it must remain socially irrelevant.*" In other words, you can be a Christian if you want, but keep it to yourself and don't try to push your superstitions and old fashioned ideas on anyone else. I'm sure that many of you have experienced this. We are tempted keep our faith-life, our church life under cloak. Too often, we succumb to the pressure to keep our faith very private.

You understand that when we talk about Church, we are not talking about a building, a congregation, or a denomination. We are speaking of every man, woman or child on the face of the earth who has been touched by the Holy Spirit and knows Jesus as Savior and Lord. It is what we say we *believe in* every time we speak the creed, "*I believe in the holy catholic universal Church, the communion of saints.*" In other words, I believe that I'm a part of something really big, really significant, and that means I'm really somebody! A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, called to point people to the light!

What is there about the Church that provokes these exciting phrases? What makes us so unique and special? Aren't we just one of a multitude of world religions? What justifies this kind of language?

We find a significant part of the answer in **the Gospel lesson** where we listen to Jesus trying to comfort his disciples, preparing them for his impending death. He says, "*Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust me! I'm going to the Father's house and there is a place there for you... mansions!*" Thomas says, "*We don't know where you are going and we don't know the way! Jesus tells him, I am the way!*" You see, this is not confusing language for us. We know where he was going..the same place we are going! And we know the way. "*I am the resurrection and the life, says Jesus, he who lives and believes in me shall never die!*" This is very special and unique! For every other religion in the world life after death is filled with uncertainty, and considerable anxiety.

I vividly recall being at the bedside of a fellow pastor who was in the last days of a terminal illness. He said, "*I am ready to go home, but, you understand, I am not homesick!*" Only one of God's chosen people can talk like that...expressing joy in this life, with all the blessings experienced here and yet filled with confidence in the face of death.

You see, God's special people have perspective, the broad view that extends even beyond the grave...and so are able to cope so much better with life's uncertainties and losses. We know that life is not a rose garden, and no one gets a pass from troubles and worries. But we are able to see the whole picture and so avoid the pitfall of being so wrapped up in the petty things of life that we forget about the rest of the story.

Don't ever forget how special this is. Yes, we grieve when we encounter tragedy, but we don't grieve as others who have no hope!

Another **glory of the Church is revealed in the book of Acts, our first lesson and some succeeding verses.** Here we are able to get a peek into first exciting days of the Church's existence. The Jewish establishment was very aware that whole city was asking questions about this prophet who had been crucified and stories were flying around about a resurrection. They wanted this whole Jesus thing to be swept under the rug and quickly forgotten. They threaten the disciples, throw them in jail and tell them to say nothing more about it. But Peter pays no mind. "*I cannot but speak of the things I have seen and heard!*" He boldly preaches Christ and he crucified and thousands are baptized. **It is so impressive to me that as soon as this body of believers had been identified they began to care for each other, feeding the poor among them, providing an organized system of support, being a real community of care and concern.** It's true that the care of the needy was a well-entrenched tradition of Judaism, but the Christian church added its own special flavor. There would be no discrimination, no one would receive more or less, no matter if you were Jew or Gentile. It would not be long before this spirit of mutual care and concern became one of the identifying

characteristics of the Christian church. When the pagan world began to see this remarkable spiritual movement growing like a forest fire, they said “Behold, *how they love one another.*” It made them stand out. They were special people.

It is **still one of the identifying marks of the Church**. Do you realize that almost all the institutions of mercy in our society had their historic origins in Christian outreach to the unfortunate and often forgotten. The establishment of hospitals, the care of the mentally ill, the feeding of the hungry, the care of the dying, recovery from storm and flood. The secular world does not understand or appreciate the debt it owes to the Christian church for making these ministries so prominent and normative in our culture. This **community of care and concern also defines congregational life**. It saddens me that so many Christians remain at the outer fringes of the congregational family, worshiping occasionally but never sharing in small groups or attending any fellowship events, expending no energy in developing friendships. They miss so much of what the Church has to offer. Individual, isolated Christianity is really not Christianity at all. The Bible knows nothing of individual, isolated Christian experience. It always infers or assumes God's special people gathered together to worship, we gather together to serve, we gather together to care for and comfort one another.

It is a family, the family of God. Brothers and sisters by blood, the blood of Christ who cleanses us and makes us whole and joins us together to love one another and provide care and comfort to a hurting world.

Finally, **one cannot talk about God's special people without speaking of our primary task, our mission in the world**. These royal priests are called out of darkness into the light to declare His praises...to give witness to a hurting, dying world. Jesus is the ultimate priest, the bridge-builder who provides access to God by the cleansing power of his righteousness, by the atoning sacrifice of his cross. But now we are royal priests, we are the bridge to the nations, the ambassadors of the King, the means God has chosen to speak his Word, to share His message. We are empowered by His Spirit and sent into our neighborhoods to let His light shine through us.

Do your neighbors have the broad view of life? Do they have perspective? Or do they seem so wrapped up in the petty things of life that they have no awareness of the mansions prepared for them. Is Jesus Christ their way? Their truth? Their life? Is there a way for you to let them know that you have been blessed with perspective? That you can be ready, even eager to go home... and yet not be homesick? That because Jesus Christ is your way, your truth, that you have a life filled with joy and no fear of dying? Is there a way to show them a special kind of compassion in a moment of need? Do you have opportunity to be one of those special people who allow the Church to be seen and experienced as those who love one another?

Compared to some places on our globe, it would be foolishness for us to think of ourselves as a persecuted church. I read that about 90,000 Christians have lost their lives in the

last few years because of their faith, true martyrs. Nothing like that close by...but even so, there is an undertow, an increasing subtle pressure in our culture that would demean and denigrate the Church and strive to quiet the word of witness that testifies to Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life. All too often we are perfectly comfortable standing in the shadows, living and working with people for months and years without them ever knowing that we follow Jesus and have perspective.

It's a good time for us to listen to St. Peter and remind ourselves that we are somebody! We are a special people. We are privileged....chosen. We did not choose him, he chose us, a royal priesthood...bridge-builders... declaring the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We are somebody. We need to throw our shoulders back and stand tall. We must lift high the cross. And we do it as humble servants, letting them know we are Christians by our love. Amen