

5-3-26 sermon

1 Peter 2.2-10

About 30 years ago, my best friend of 40 years, Rev. Dr. Matt Russell started a new worshipping community in Houston, Texas. After completing his Master of Divinity degree at Fuller Seminary, he joined the staff of Chapelwood United Methodist Church, which had a membership of about 5,000 people. We had both worked with the Senior Pastor there, Rev. Dr. Jim Jackson, while we were in Lubbock, Texas, and Jim had invited Matt to join the staff at Chapelwood. When he arrived, Jim asked him, "What do you want to do?" Matt responded, "I want to start a community for people who've left the church," to which Jim responded, "OK." If you've read anything about the church in the United States today, you'll no doubt be familiar with the term "deconstructing faith." It describes people who are walking away from religious institutions often because of the harm they've experienced within them or because they're aware of the harm they've caused others. They don't, however, walk away from their faith. Thirty years ago, few people were talking about people who were leaving the church, let alone describing such people as "deconstructing faith." Certainly, people were interested in numerical decline, but it was the peak of the 'megachurch' era, and a lot of research was devoted to their success, noting that a lot of their members were coming from other churches. But Matt knew that people were leaving the church and *not* looking for another. So, he asked Jim for a list of all the people who had left Chapelwood over the past 12 months, and began to call them, inviting them for a chat over coffee to hear their story, "no strings attached."

To cut a long story short, Matt interviewed about 80 people, former members and their friends who had left their own church. After a year, he invited them all to gather at this house to begin imagining what a church would have to look like for them to be a part of one again. When he invited any who were interested in helping shape such a community, fifteen people accepted the invitation, twelve of whom "just happened" to be recovering alcoholics. As they began to meet and talk and dream, to pray and read scripture together, today's passage became foundational for the community that would be birthed out of their experience. The last two verses spoke to that group more than any other text:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

The members of that little group knew deeply what it means to be called out of the deep darkness of addiction into marvelous light. They knew what it felt like to *not* belong, to be isolated in their addiction, but now to have found fellowship with others like themselves, relying on God as they understood God for their new life.

And they knew deeply what it means to receive mercy, and not judgment in the rooms of AA. So, they called this new worshipping community "Mercy Street," and the community of Mercy Street gathered to worship last night, as they have done every Saturday night for almost 30

years. During the seven years Rebecca and I served alongside Matt at Mercy Street, at one point we had a young man live with us for a season who was early in recovery, as was his then girlfriend. Today, that girlfriend is his wife, and she is the pastor of Mercy Street.

I think the apostle Peter would recognize the community of Mercy Street were he to visit of a Saturday night. Indeed, his letter could well have been written to that community. Peter addresses his letter to “the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” While it’s possible to make the case that he’s addressing fellow Jewish Christians in the diaspora, those scattered across the Roman empire, I think he’s primarily writing to a *gentile* audience. Pagans who’ve joined this little Jewish sect called ‘The Way,’ which claims that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish rabbi crucified by the Roman state, is in fact the Messiah, the Son of God, Savior of the world. These pagans have thrown their lot in with this subversive Jewish sect, but still have much to learn about living their new life faithfully. There’s a couple of passages in the letter that lead me to this conclusion. Verses 18 to 21 of chapter one read,

“You know that you were ransomed from the futile conduct inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ... Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your trust and hope are in God.”

That sounds to me like people who worship a pantheon of gods, through idols in temples. But especially the conclusion of today’s passage: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;” people of the one God of Israel. And in that same sense, Peter is also addressing *us*. Gentiles, grafted into the tree with Jewish roots. Hearing the same words spoken to the Israelites soon after they had experienced the exodus event: liberation from slavery in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, and standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they hear these words given by God for Moses to speak to them:

“Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

So when these words were read aloud from the letter:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

I can imagine one of the Jewish members of the community re-telling the great events of the exodus. Perhaps marveling that these gentiles now join that long line of all those descended from the formerly enslaved Israelites in Egypt millennia before. Those called to proclaim God’s mighty acts, who called them out of darkness into marvelous light. I think John August Swanson’s beautiful painting on the front of your bulletin captures something of the idea Peter is trying to instill in his readers. As he writes just before this,

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

“*You*,” Peter writes, “*you* are now the temple of the God of Israel.” A temple not made with stone, like all those in your cities, temples containing idols of silver and gold representing all the deities. Nor like the temples of the imperial cult, dedicated to the Caesars, those called “Father of Rome,” the “son of god,” the “Savior of the world.” No, the temple is *you*. *You* are where the presence of God exists in the world. *You* are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

One of the key pillars of the Protestant Reformation was “the priesthood of all believers,” largely based in this passage of scripture. Luther himself wrote in the tract, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, “How then if they,” – meaning those who have been ordained – “are forced to admit that we are all equally priests, as many of us as are baptized, and by this way we truly are; while to them is committed only the Ministry that is consented to by us? If they recognize this, they would know that they have no right to exercise power over us in what has not been committed to them except insofar as we may have granted it to them.”

It is this sentiment – or something close to it – which is why I have chosen not to be ordained to this point of my 30-plus years of pastoral ministry. I truly believe in the “priesthood of all believers,” that our baptism *is* our ordination. That together we are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, living stones forming a spiritual house.” And in many ways, I still do not accept that the sacraments belong only in the hands of certain Christians. But I do accept that the church has always set aside some people to serve in certain ways, and as the Presbyterian Church as a whole ordains Ruling Elders to govern the church (rather than placing that power in the hands of Teaching Elders) and as this Presbyterian Church in particular has set me aside to serve in this way, I am slowly making peace with the idea of being ordained as a Teaching Elder. But that does *not* alter my conviction that together we are the priesthood. But not as a collection of individual people who are “priests,” but that we *as a people* form the priesthood.

And that “to proclaim the mighty acts of God” does not mean individuals such as myself preaching the Gospel from pulpits like this, but that our shared life is to serve as a visible witness to the liberating power of God. In the first century Roman empire, these small communities were an anomaly: Jews and gentiles, men and women, the enslaved and the free, all sitting at the same table to share meals. A visible – and offensive – presence in every city where they were found. Fast forward 2,000 years to our own context here in the United States, and most churches are relatively homogenous, self-selecting by social class, or worship style preferences. Increasingly by political opinion, or the lack thereof expressed in sermons!

One of the things I loved about Mercy Street was the diversity across social classes. One member once quipped, “We’ve got everyone from Penn State to the state pen,” and that was true! And some of those on the Penn State end of that spectrum came in order to learn from those towards the state pen end. They wanted the kind of raw, honest and vital spirituality of those who had been brought from all manner of darkness into God’s marvelous light. We did ‘celebrations’ every week, much like we do here, and I loved that some of the young women from the Santa Maria hostel would stand up and celebrate 7 days free of their drug of choice. Or celebrate that they were about to get their children back from CPS, and a room full of people would clap and cheer them on. Then, right after that, a couple visiting from the wider church might celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. And all of those celebrations “proclaimed the mighty acts of God.” Because I know there were people in those seats who needed to know that you *could* be married for a very long time. That there were people who had 24 hours of sobriety who needed to know that it was possible to be *seven* days sober.

So, church, how are we proclaiming the mighty acts of God in our shared life? Not just here, on Sunday mornings, but throughout the week? What is our visible witness to the mighty acts of God? How are we allowing ourselves “to be built into a spiritual house”? To be “a holy priesthood” together? How can we who have received mercy, be those who extend it to others? What are we already doing, and what might God be inviting us to do, *together* in the days, and weeks and years to come? I’m eager to find out! So that when this text rolls around again in three years’ time, we’ll have some new things to celebrate together, as God continues to call us into God’s marvelous light – together! And as we discover new ways to walk down the street called “mercy” – together!

May it be so.