



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

A Royal Priesthood

First Peter 1:2-12

I am using this period of the year between Epiphany and Lent to preach a series of sermons on First Peter. Today's text is First Peter 2:4-10. Hear the word as written by Peter:

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’

“Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and, ‘a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’

“They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

It is always dangerous when I view a Tony Campolo video, because he always challenges me to stretch my understanding of who I am. Then, in return, I subject you to what I have recently learned, with the hope it will challenge you in your walk with Christ.

In our text Peter reminds us that we are a **“royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.”** It is a concept we need to revisit from time to time because we live in a political environment that wants to define who God’s people are.

I have to tell you that I know some Democrats who believe that Jesus is a Democrat and to be a real Christian, a Christian dedicated to the purpose of Christ

you have to be a Democrat. And, of course, I know some Republicans who believe that Jesus is a Republican and to be a real Christian, a Christian dedicated to the purpose of Christ, you have to be a Republican. I think I can say with some confidence that Jesus is neither a Democrat nor a Republican, and that real Christians are in the Democratic Party and in the Republican Party.

The problem we have with our identity as the church in America is that politicians know how to push the hot buttons that polarize the church. They push the abortion button, or the gay marriage button, or the environmentalism button, or military spending button, or the immigration button, or the refugee button, or the radical Islam button, and the church begins to split along political lines.

I wish that Democrats and Republicans would get together, open their Bibles and read the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount and ask, “If we are to take Jesus seriously, what can we conclude about our policies as a nation, and our behavior as individuals?”

I wonder if I asked everyone in this sanctuary to stand up if you consider yourself an evangelical, how many would stand. I believe it would depend on what you understand to be the definition of evangelical. Now, I warn you that I am becoming as adamant about the correct usage of the word “evangelical” as I am about the word “awesome.” You know me well enough to know that I do not think your new shoes are awesome, I do not think your iPhone 7 or 8, or whatever the latest version is, is awesome. God is awesome, and God’s creation is pretty awesome, and you cannot compare God or God’s creation with shoes or iPhones.

In our current political environment, I often hear “the evangelicals.” It was the evangelical vote that swayed the election. Or the evangelicals stand on a certain issue. In many places Christians refuse to identify themselves as evangelical because when they do others begin to think they are anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-environment, pro war and opposed to immigration. These issues may define your politics, but they do not define evangelical.

My hope, my prayer is that every member of this church is an evangelical, for an evangelical is a person who shares good news. You can hear evangelism in the word. Evangelicals are people who share the love and grace we know in Jesus Christ with our dark world.

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out

of darkness into his wonderful light.” You are a chosen people to declare the good news in a dark world.

Since tomorrow is our national day to celebrate the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I would remind you that this is much of what Dr. King was about. His life was about being a Christian bringing light into the darkness of racism. And when it comes to the polarization of both the church and our nation, it was Dr. King’s vision of America for us to be one. He would speak against polarization, and I think he would have as harsh words for those on the extreme left as he has for those on the extreme right.

He would call people to come together. Dr. King loved those verses in Second Corinthians that say “You who have been reconciled to God are called to a ministry of reconciliation.” “I look forward,” he said in his great “I Have a Dream” speech, “To an America where blacks and whites can reconcile, but more than that where all peoples are reconciled.” Reconciliation--we are called to a ministry of reconciliation, and when we nurture polarization we are running contrary to the teachings of God’s word.

A long, long time ago, back in the Middle Ages when my father was a minister, there used to be a radio program called “The Back to God Hour.”

In one city “The Back to God Hour” was broadcast in the time slot immediately following the weekly broadcast of a local church. The pastor of that church recalls that each week at the end of his church’s broadcast the announcer would come on the air and say these words: “You have been listening to the service of worship at First Presbyterian Church, and now ‘Back to God.’”

Sometimes I wonder if the church needs go get back to God. Does the church need to evaluate its vast resources and honestly answer the question: Have we used God’s gifts in a way that honors God, or in a way that makes religion easy with little or no sacrifice on our part for others? Is our faith simply sitting through a boring sermon, an opportunity to sing a hymn, maybe even put a few coins in the collection plate and call it a sacrifice? Has the faith of the church become one that can be put on the shelf, and then taken down when we are in need of a favor from God?

Many years ago, a man named Bruce journeyed to Rwanda as a short-term missionary. He worked for several weeks doing refugee relief. One day he was traveling along the road with his driver, when the jeep made a sudden stop by a large open field which had been recently bulldozed. To Bruce’s surprise, the driver

got out of the jeep and asked Bruce to come with him. They walked to the edge of the field and stood silently for some time. As Bruce studied the field, it soon became apparent that this was not just any field. It was a mass grave for hundreds who had been slain in a nightmare of tribal violence.

This driver stared out upon the open field and quietly spoke with tears in his eyes: “This is the place where I learned to hate God. I would often come and stand and look out over the hundreds of bodies, the bodies of my people, the bodies of my friends and my family. I would stand here and I would scream out at God saying, ‘Why, why have you not done anything to prevent this? Why have you abandoned us?’

“And for many, many weeks God remained silent. But as I stood here, day after day, hating God, this is also the place where I learned to love God. For one day, as I stood here cursing God, God answered me. He said, ‘Winston’--that was the driver’s name--God said, ‘Winston, I never abandoned you. I was here all along, I was here as you cried, I was here when you said you hated me, I was here suffering with you, and with tears suffered with those who suffered.’

“And on that day I realized that I had directed my question to the wrong person. My question should not have been put to God. My question should have been put to the church.

“Why do you not do something?”

And it is true. There are many times when the church has remained silent in the face of unspeakable evil. I’m certain that many times in our history the world has directed that question to us: “Why do you not do something?” I’m equally certain that God directs that question to me. “Why do you not do something?” Then, for example, I think about those refugees in Syria, or people in our one community who are marginalized.

I love the church of Jesus Christ. I believe in the church. But I wonder if we have become so complacent with our comfortable world that I have neglected the world where Jesus has called us to share the good news. The problem may stem from a lack of understanding of who or what Christ has called us to be. **“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”**

I understand there are some who profess Christ, though I am certain there is no one in the church who understands that the church is no more than a sanctuary,

a temple, a shrine, or God help us, a museum. That is, to some the church is a place you go to pay homage to God. Some go weekly; some go every month or so, some perhaps twice a year. Once they've done that, they feel they have fulfilled their religious obligation. These are nice people. However, they don't have a clue about what it means to be a church.

The church is not a place we go--the church is who we are! We are **“a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God . . .”** This building is not the church. It is where the church meets. When you leave this building you are still the church. When you go to your civic club, you are still the church. When you dine with your family, when you have recreation, when you go to the office, when you fulfill your civic responsibility, you are still the church. And if I do any of these things with no thought to God, I am betraying my calling as a follower of Jesus Christ.

A long, long time ago the philosopher Aristides described the early Christian community to the Roman Emperor Hadrian with these words, “They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the person who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home as a brother or sister in the spirit, the Spirit of God.” That's who we are--or at least, that's who we've been called to be. Church is not a place we go. It's not the building. The church is who we are!

A word Peter uses to describe us is “priest.” You are a priest. That is a foundational understanding of our Reformed faith, the priesthood of all believers. It's not just something that sounds good, it is a reality that some have forgotten.

We are not all called to serve the church as ministers who preach and administer the sacraments. That is an ordained calling to a special function in the church, but it does not make me any more of a priest than you. We are all priests. And a literal definition of a priest is a bridge builder. Everyone who professes Jesus Christ as Lord is a bridge builder. Of course, most us are not engineers, but we are to build bridges that assist those who do not know Jesus to know him. We are all called as God's representatives, or bridge builders, evangelicals.

We are to be priests to one another. Christian believers have a responsibility for one another. The New Testament is absolutely clear on this issue.

Dr. Jim Standiford, a prominent pastor in San Diego tells about his father, a devoted churchman. His father loved the church but he was a frequent and severe critic of those with whom he disagreed on church matters. Standiford recalls times

when his father “chewed out” the Session of his home congregation. His father could be a difficult man at times. Then his father’s mother died.

Dr. Standiford’s grandmother was one of the matriarchs of the congregation. She was affectionately known to all as “Mother Standiford.” At the end of her funeral service, as Jim Standiford’s dad was beginning to walk down the aisle out of the church behind his mother’s casket, he collapsed. Two of the very persons he had so recently publicly criticized, chewing them up one side and down the other, came to his side, lifted him, and walked down the aisle, one on each side supporting him. It was in that moment, as a high school junior, that the younger Standiford saw the church in a whole new light. Suddenly he understood what the church was. Those two men’s demonstration of their love for his father, even though they were so severely criticized, became Jim Standiford’s call to ministry.

Who are we? We are priests to one another and to the world. Regardless of whether we see eye-to-eye on things, we have a responsibility for one another. There is a Zulu proverb that goes like this: “When a thorn pierces the foot, the whole body bends over to pull it out.” When one person in a community experiences pain, the rest of the community shares its strength with that person in order to ease the pain. That’s who we are - priests to one another.

We are also called to be priests to the world. That is, we are God’s representatives to our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, and to the wider world for whom Christ died.

A leader at a church conference told about his young son, who one day came home from school with something he wanted to show to his Mom. “Mom, we are studying dinosaurs--look what I have!” He then showed her a picture of a gigantic dinosaur towering over a two-story house. Of course a picture of a dinosaur standing over a man-made house confused the boy as to when dinosaurs roamed the earth. So he asked his mother a difficult question, “When did we kill off all the dinosaurs, so that it would be safe for houses to be built and kids to play outside?”

“Well, we didn’t kill off the dinosaurs, and we don’t know exactly how they were eliminated. Some scientists believe that it was a result of an ice age when the plants the dinosaurs ate were frozen out and the dinosaurs starved. Others suggest it was a giant meteorite that caused a great change in the temperature and dinosaurs could not adapt and survive in the cold.” I would guess all this was difficult for the boy to understand, but his mother concluded, “The dinosaurs are no longer here because a long, long time ago before God created people there was a tremendous

climate change so that now people are able to build cities and children are able to play outside.”

This leader at this conference went on to suggest that in similar fashion the task of the church is not necessarily to slay giant dragons, as much as it is to change the climate so that the Gospel may flourish and the evil dragons die out. Please know I am not suggesting that dinosaurs were evil.

What I am suggesting is that the purpose of the church is to change the spiritual, social, moral and political climate of our world so that the kingdoms of this world bear a more striking resemblance to the kingdom of our God. We do this by being priests to every person we meet, and we do this by the witness of our lives to the world – by being evangelicals.

The church is not a place we go--the church is who we are! We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God . . .” We are to be priests to one another. We are to be priests to the world.

We are people who have a strong sense of God’s presence in our lives.

A few weeks after he was elected President of the United States, Ronald Reagan shared with the nation a letter he had received from an elementary school in Iowa. A child had written, “Dear Mr. President, You have now been elected President of the United States; now go to the Oval office and get to work.”

The church of Jesus Christ, this royal priesthood, is called by God to represent Him in the world, to get to work so the world knows exactly who we are! Do you know who you are? It’s a lot to live up to-- **“a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”**