

May 10, 2020 – 1 Peter 2:2-10

It feels good to be back in this pulpit. Just as I'm sure it feels good for all of you to be back in those pews. I know, I know. A couple dozen people spread out over the entire sanctuary isn't exactly what we were hoping for when worship resumed. But it's a whole lot better than nothing.

Which is what a lot of people are still dealing with. A good portion of this country still can't worship in their buildings yet. And there are still plenty of people who say that we shouldn't be either. Who say that Governor Parson is moving too quickly. That we should be more cautious and keep the churches closed a little longer.

I understand that. I really do. And from a purely practical, rational, materialistic standpoint, they might be right. We are taking a risk by being here today. We've try to reduce the risk as best we can. But we can't eliminate it all together. And I think you all know that. But while I will obey the government and look out for the wellbeing of my neighbor when the governor says to close our doors, if he says that we can be open, then we're going to be open.

The truth is, our priorities are different from the rest of the world's. Our understanding of the world is different. Our goals in life are different. We are different from those who would say that we should stay home.

And our Epistle lesson today addresses that very issue. And it's really a continuation of the topic that we began last week: holiness. What does it mean to be holy? Peter calls us a holy priesthood. A holy nation. What does that mean?

Well, we can look at it in two different ways. Holiness is to be clean and sinless before God, and holiness is to be different than the world around us. And those two things fit together pretty well because the world around us is pretty unclean and sinful, which inevitably makes us really, really different. Such that we are basically exiles in this world. Foreigners. Aliens. People who don't belong here.

And so Peter says, *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."*

Now, there's a lot to dig into here. But I want to start by focusing on one particular phrase: a people for his own possession. If you pull out a few different translations of the Bible, you'll find that phrase is translated in several different ways.

The NIV says, "God's special possession." The RSV says, "God's own people." The Message says, "God's instruments." But if you go back all the way to the King James, it uses a really interesting expression, "a peculiar people."

Now, back in 1611, when the King James Version was written, "peculiar" had a different connotation. It meant that something was distinctive and notable. If a flower was "peculiar to a region," it meant that the flower only grew in that one region.

Over time, the idea of peculiarity has taken on an additional meaning of being not just distinctive, but strange. Abnormal. Defective, even.

And yet, in this passage, I think both ideas are accurate in today's day and age. We are peculiar in the sense of being distinctive. We are holy people. And that's sets us apart. It makes us different. But in a really good way. In a way that is pleasing to God our Father.

But, in the world's eyes, we're just strange. We're abnormal. We're defective. We're peculiar people. And we always will be. Because if we stopped being peculiar to the world, then we would also stop being peculiar to God. If we stopped being strange and abnormal and defective to the world, then we would also stop being distinctive and set-apart and holy to God.

Because, to us, when God says, “You shall not murder,” we believe that means you shall not murder anyone, including the unborn and the sick. And that makes us peculiar. When Jesus says, “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to wife,” we believe that means a MAN will leave his father and mother and be united to his WIFE.” And that makes us peculiar. And when Jesus says that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him, then we believe that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the Father. And that makes us peculiar.

But we can also take this peculiarity too far. And so you end up with the Amish and Mennonites. Thinking that Christians must make themselves as different from the world as they can. Because the more different we are from the world, the more holy we are in God's eyes.

The problem is that misses the point entirely. Because our peculiarity is about God making us peculiar. Our holiness is about God making us holy. It's about God seeing us as different, even though we're not.

Because, despite all our attempts at holiness and obedience to God's Law, we aren't really any different than the people out there. We're sinners, just like them. We live with the same greed and lust and pride and hate and selfishness as every other human being on this planet. We shouldn't be peculiar. We shouldn't be holy. We shouldn't be saved from death and hell.

But we are. Because God says we are. Because he chooses to see something other than the sinner we are. Because he chooses to make us into something different than the sinner we are. And because he chooses to give us a future that's different than the future we would otherwise have.

And so we are chosen and precious to God. We are living stones that he has made worthy to be built up into his spiritual house. Right alongside the cornerstone, Christ himself.

We are a chosen race. You look at some people and you say, “That person is white or black or hispanic or asian.” They didn't choose to be that race. It's just how they were born.

In God's eyes, we are not white or black or hispanic or asian. We are Christian. That is our race. And we are that race not by birth, but by rebirth. Because God chose it for us in Holy Baptism. We are a chosen race.

And a royal priesthood. In many religions, the king was a god. And the only people who had access to him were his family and the priests who led the worship of him.

But we are a royal priesthood. We have full and complete access to God. Because we are both his family, sons and daughters of the king through our adoption by baptism, and we are his priests, encouraged and commanded to pray to him directly.

We are all these things for one purpose: so that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. That is our reason for existence. That is our purpose in life.

We are called to be different. We called to live in the light, not in the darkness. We are called to be holy and peculiar. A chosen race and royal priesthood.

But we have this calling not to antagonize the culture. Not to be different for the sake of being different. Not to prove our worthiness to God.

No, we have this calling in order to make others different, like us. We have this calling in order to proclaim the excellencies of a holy and peculiar God who wants to make everyone holy and peculiar just like him.

And so we long for the pure spiritual milk that we find joining together in worship. The spiritual milk of sins confessed and sins forgiven. The spiritual milk of reading scripture and hearing a sermon. The spiritual milk of receiving Christ's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

We long for the pure spiritual milk of Word and Sacrament that we may grow up to salvation. And be that peculiar, holy people to a world that doesn't understand why we would risk our lives to do something as silly as go to church.

Not realizing that we are not risking our lives by being here. Because we've already been called out of darkness into his marvelous light. We've already received God's mercy. We've already been raised from the dead, just as Christ was raised from the dead.

And now we are not dead stones in a nation struggling with disease and death. We are living stones in a living church. Resting on Christ our cornerstone for all things. And though they try to criticize us for our beliefs and ridicule us for our faith, we will not be put to shame.

For we are indeed a peculiar people. A holy people. A chosen people. A people who are the personal possession of God almighty. Amen.