

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 5, 2014**

BEING THE CHURCH

1 Peter 4:4-10

Shortly after I graduated from seminary, I was invited to be part of a small group of pastors in Lancaster County, PA, who would meet for some informal mentoring with a retired seminary professor who had also served as a pastor earlier in his life. The retired professor told us that when he first started out in ministry as a young pastor, one of his life goals was to come up with three original ideas – three ideas that no one before him had ever thought of. He wanted to be a trail blazer. He wanted to be on the cutting edge of new ideas for ministry in the name of Jesus. In his retirement years, when he shared this with us, he said he was still working to come up with the first one.

Can you relate to that? I can. I am not an original thinker. I didn't get the creativity gene. It is not my gift. But *God* is an original thinker. God is the *original* thinker. God is creative with a capital "C". The Bible says that God thought up things out of nothing and then spoke them into being. That is creative genius and power in the same package.

Have you ever thought about some of God's original ideas, ideas that originated in the mind and heart of God Himself?

How about *marriage* – the union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of exclusive love and faithfulness – along with the mystery and wonder of sexual intimacy that God designed for the marriage relationship? It was God's idea. Sex was God's idea. It is a gift from God, a good and gracious gift from a good and gracious God. But God designed it to be expressed not whenever, wherever, or with whomever you desire at a given moment. It is designed to be the mutual expression of self-giving love by husband and wife to one another within the marriage relationship. Marriage was God's idea, and it is treason against God to think we are free to overrule Him and redefine marriage to suit ourselves.

How about *the family*, the basic building block of human society? It was God's idea.

How about *the incarnation*, when God Himself took on "flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *MSG*), when God came to live in our world in order to reveal to us the fullness of His truth, the life-changing power of His grace, and the depth of His love for us? God's idea.

How about *the cross*, which proved to be a stumbling block to so many of the Jews and just so much foolishness to non-Jews, to well-educated Greeks who, with all their sophistication and erudition, couldn't figure it out? So they shook their heads and turned away. But to those who are called by God and touched by His grace, the cross demonstrates the power and the wisdom and the love of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24) in a way that nothing else does. It is a symbol, a beautiful, enduring symbol, of Jesus' victory over sin for us. It was God's idea.

So was *the resurrection*, as God raised Jesus Christ His Son from the dead on Easter morning, demonstrating in a dramatic way that death does not have the final word, and that God's redeeming power, sovereign love, and gracious purposes are stronger than death. The resurrection of Jesus is proof that nothing in the whole universe, not even death itself, has the power to separate us from God's love for us (Romans 8:38-39). It was God's idea.

All of these were God's ideas. So is *the church*. The church is not a human invention. Nor is it just another institution of society. The church was and is God's idea. It was ordained and established by the Lord Jesus Christ. He thought of the church. It belongs to Him, not to us, nor to anyone else or any other group who may claim ownership of it. This church doesn't belong to us. It belongs to Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and will always be both the Savior and the head of the church. The church was God's idea. He was and is the One who determines the purpose of the church in the world. He was and is the One who defines the church's mission, the One who commissions and equips the church to carry out its God-ordained mission in the world. The whole idea of the church started with God.

This being so, it becomes all the more important for us to increase our knowledge and understanding of what the Bible says about the church, and the different ways it is described in God's Word.

When we hear the word "church", or use it in conversation, I think most of us tend to think of a particular place or a building. When someone asks where Faith Church is, we say our church is located at 5725 Castlewellan Drive in Kingstowne, just off South Van Dorn Street, one block south of Franconia Road, across Castlewellan Drive from the Edison High School football stadium. We say our church is right next to the Jefferson Funeral Chapel. And we're just up the hill from Top Golf, whose customers still pepper our property with golf balls, occasionally damaging a vehicle or even hitting a member of our church family. When we talk about "going to church", it means we are going to a place we call "church," a place we identify as "church."

It is true that we meet together as a church here at 5725 Castlewellan Drive in this beautiful worship space where you can feel in your spirit the presence of God in His mercy and grace, love and trust, holiness and power. But the church's address, its facilities or buildings, is not the church. This place is not Faith Church. Faith Church meets here. But this is not Faith Church. As many of you know, Faith Church existed for 8 or 9 years before this place of worship was built, meeting all those years in rented space at Key Middle School on Franconia Road. If something were to happen to this church building, if it were to be destroyed in a fire, would it be the end of Faith Church? No. Because there is much more to a church than a building, a place or address.

There is more to a church than property and facilities. I'm not saying that property and facilities don't matter. I don't want to get the property and facilities guys (like Tee and Hank and Jon and Mark and Susan) mad at me! It is just that the bricks and mortar that build the church are not bricks and mortar. It is people. The church is made of people – ordinary people like you and me from all walks of life, who have been touched and changed by God's grace. People who through an encounter with the gospel have come to faith in Christ and

found peace and joy as never before. People who have found forgiveness and freedom from sin and guilt. People who have found in Jesus Christ the true source of strength for today and hope for tomorrow. People who have become new creations in Christ and have the blessed assurance of an eternal home in heaven with God. It is all this, and more. The church consists of people who, in response to the amazing grace God has lavished on them, have placed their trust wholeheartedly in the Lord Jesus Christ and pledged their undying allegiance to Him to live their lives – *our* lives – as fully devoted followers of Christ in this world.

What all of us in the church have in common with each other is not that we are good, moral people who have made ourselves acceptable to God and earned His love, or that we are better than people who don't go to church. No way. What we have in common is that we are all sinners who need a Savior, because there is no way in the world we can ever save ourselves. What we have in common is that "we all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to (our) own way" (Isaiah 53:6). What we have in common is that, in one way or another, we are all messed up. We have all made a mess of our lives. We are all great sinners. All of us. We are great sinners who have an even greater Savior. What we have in common is that we are forgiven. What we have in common is grace, amazing grace that is greater than all our sin, grace that comes – you've heard this before – free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like me. And you. Which means that if we think of the church as a place, we've got to think of it as *a place of grace*.

This does not mean that we don't take sin seriously. We have to take sin seriously, because God takes sin seriously. God takes it so seriously, in fact, that to deal with the problem of sin and the predicament caused by our sin, He sent His Son into the world to take our sin and the punishment we deserve upon Himself in His death for us on the cross. It is the bad news of our sinfulness that makes the good news of the gospel, the good news of God's forgiving love, the good news of His saving grace given to us in the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, so gloriously good.

While there are other descriptive terms or word pictures for the church in the Bible, I love the language Peter uses here in 1 Peter 2:4-10. Notice in verse 5 that he refers to believers as "living stones" (plural), not to be confused with Jesus, whom he identifies in verse 4 as the "Living Stone" (singular) – "rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him." The Jesus rockers of the late 1960s and early 70s liked to sing: "Jesus is my Rock, and He rolled my blues away." Some of you can remember that. Some of you probably even sang it.

Peter is not talking here about real rocks or stones being used to build a physical edifice. He is speaking in spiritual terms about a spiritual reality – the building of "a spiritual house" in which we serve as "a holy priesthood," whose priestly privilege is to offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5). *The Message* expresses it in a more colorful way, describing members of Christ's church as "building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which (we'll) serve as holy priests offering" the sacrifices of "Christ-approved lives up to God" (2:5, *MSG*).

He is not talking about a house, a museum, a sanctuary, a chapel, a temple, a mega-church, or any kind of building that just sits there. He is talking about the church as a people who are, yes, vibrant with life, because, yes, we are alive to God and alive in God. Because we have been touched by His love and redeemed by His grace.

We are “living stones,” made spiritually alive by God to be part of the church He is building in this dangerous, messed-up, rebellious world even today. There is a place and a purpose for every living stone, a place and a purpose for you – for each of us – in the church Jesus is building.

That is not all. In verse 9, Peter says that we who are in Christ are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (NIV) – a people “for (God’s) own possession” (ESV). We don’t have time today to look at these descriptions in depth. It will have to wait until next week. But take a moment to ponder what this verse says about you. About us.

- You (We) have been chosen by God. This chosenness is an expression of God’s sovereign grace. You did nothing to earn it. With chosenness comes great blessings, eternal blessings, but also the responsibility to serve God and His purposes in the world. More on this to come.
- You (We) are called to a kind of priesthood in the Lord’s service. More on this to come.
- You (We) are a holy nation. The idea of “holy” in this context means to be set apart *by* God and set apart *for* God and His purposes. More to come.
- You (We) belong to God. You (We) are His. Which means that you are loved and valued by God. And He will never, ever stop loving you.

To many people outside the church, and even to some professing Christians, being part of the church seems strange. Weird. A waste of time. And money. To one degree or another, it is our fault people come to that conclusion. It is our fault if they reach that conclusion because of the disconnect between what we say we believe and the way we live. It is our fault if we treat the church as if it exists just to serve us or to meet our needs. It is our fault if we treat the church or fellow members with disdain. It is our fault if we are constantly finding fault with the church or its leaders and constantly complaining or criticizing.

Being the church is not about showing how good we are. It is about loving and serving God, loving and serving one another, and loving and serving the world in Jesus’ name. To borrow from what Eugene Peterson has written in another context (substituting the words “church member” for “pastor’s wife”, and changing verb tenses and one pronoun): Being a church member is a vocation, “a way of life. It means participation in an intricate web of hospitality, living at the intersection of human need and God’s grace, inhabiting a community where men and women who don’t fit are welcomed, where neglected children are noticed, where the stories of Jesus are told, and people who have no stories find that they do have stories, stories that are part of the Jesus story” (i.e., the gospel). “Being a church member places us strategically, yet unobtrusively at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth” (Peterson, *The Pastor*, 95).

That, I think, is something worth pondering. And worth living. Intentionally. For the love of God and people whom God loves.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.