

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 12, 2014**

BEING THE CHURCH (2)

**1 Peter 2:9-12
John 17:6-9, 13-19**

I want to begin today where I ended last Sunday, with this description of what it means to be an active, functioning church member, adapted from Eugene Peterson's memoir entitled *The Pastor*:

Being a church member is "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" (that is, the gospel). Being a church member "places us strategically yet unobtrusively at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth" (*The Pastor*, 95).

Understood in this way, there is far more in being a church member than just coming to church, or giving financially to the church, as if you are paying dues to a club. It really is a way of life. Which is to say that there is far more to being a disciple or follower of Jesus Christ in this world than a checklist of certain do's and don'ts, since by definition to be a member of Christ's church is to be a follower or disciple of Christ. Being church members individually, or being the church together, is not about fulfilling certain obligations, or showing how good or virtuous, how moral or spiritual we are, or think we are. It is really about admitting our need and rejoicing in God's grace. It is about loving and serving God with a grateful heart. It is about loving, serving, and caring for one another. It is about loving, serving, and caring for the world in Jesus' name. It means being placed, in Peterson's words, "at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth," and participating in a community – "an intricate web of hospitality," a large extended family – where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts.

LIVING STONES

Last Sunday we noted Peter's description in verse 5 of Christian believers as "living stones," made spiritually alive by God, rescued and redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ to be part of the church He is building in the world. Every one of us who belongs to the Lord Jesus by faith is a "living stone," a living testament to the saving love, grace, and power of God. You may not feel very significant in worldly terms. You may feel as though your life really doesn't count for much, if anything, in this world. But the truth of the gospel is that your life matters to God. You matter to God so much that He sent His Son into the world to die for you, to rescue you from the dominion of sin and spiritual darkness. Because you matter to Him, God has designed a place for you as a "living stone" in the spiritual edifice He is building for the glory of His name.

That is not all Peter has to say about us. Look again at what he says in verse 9. In contrast to those who refuse to believe the gospel, who refuse to trust in Jesus, who persist in disobeying God's Word, Peter says that we who have been saved by grace, who trust in Jesus Christ and His saving work for us, are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that (we) may declare the praises of Him who called (us) out of darkness into His wonderful light."

A CHOSEN PEOPLE

"Chosen" is the Greek word *eklektos*, which can also be translated "elect." Peter must have remembered the words of Jesus recorded by John in John 15, where Jesus said to His disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit (for my kingdom) You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:16, 19). What is unmistakable in these verses, as well as other Bible verses, is God's initiative in choosing us (as spiritual descendants of the New Testament disciples) to be His disciples and members of His church in the world today. God's initiative in choosing us and adopting us as His sons and daughters through faith in Jesus Christ does not eliminate the necessity of making a personal response to the gospel invitation to repent of our sins and trust wholeheartedly in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Nor does it diminish the significance of our response. It does mean, however, that our election, our chosenness by God, precedes our response to believe and embrace the gospel.

There is a sense of holy mystery surrounding the biblical doctrine of election. Many Christians find it offensive. I find it both mysterious and comforting. I believe it is something to celebrate. For I know that apart from God's free and sovereign grace in electing to save me, on my own, I would never have chosen to believe the gospel and live as a follower of Jesus. Never. Neither would any of you. With being chosen by God come blessings untold that we have done nothing to earn. It is all by grace.

Along with the blessings of election comes the responsibility to serve God and His purposes in the world. We are chosen by God not only for salvation but for service. God has a mission for us to fulfill, a charge for us to keep, as His church in this world, and individually as members of His church. More often than not in the Old Testament, God's chosen people, the people of Israel, failed to carry out the mission their identity as the chosen people entailed. More often than not, they failed to see or refused to embrace the truth that their chosenness involved a sacred calling to serve God in the world. Dear friends, let us not fail in our day as they did in theirs. We are "a chosen people" – chosen by God to be His people, to point people to Jesus and His saving love in both word and deed, to be instruments of His grace, to be salt and light in this place and time. For the glory of God and the good of the world.

CALLED OUT

The New Testament word for "church" is *ekklesia*, from which we get the word "ecclesiastical," referring to matters of one kind or another relating to the church. *Ekklesia* means "called out." The church consists of all whom God has chosen and "called out" from the world "for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments

to do His work and (to) speak out for Him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference He made for [us]” (1 Peter 2:9, *MSG*). We – you and I, all of us at Faith, and all who are part of Christ’s church anywhere and everywhere in the world – have been “called out” by God to be different from the world. Jesus did not send His disciples into the world to mirror or reflect the values and ways of the world. Jesus sent His disciples into the world to shine the light of the gospel, the light of Jesus Himself, into the darkness, deception, and confusion of the world. This remains the purpose for which Jesus has called *us* out and sent *us* into the world.

A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

As His chosen and called out people, we have the high privilege – all of us – to serve as priests in the service of the King of Kings. Throughout both Scripture and church history, the principal role of a priest has been to represent people before God – to go into God’s presence, to offer sacrifices, to petition God on behalf of the people, and to advocate before God on their behalf. In Old Testament times, only priests could offer sacrifices for sin on behalf of God’s people. Even though, in the death of Jesus, the curtain in the temple separating us from the presence of God was torn in two (Matthew 27:51), the belief that access to God was restricted so that a priestly intermediary was required, and that “ordinary” Christians did not have direct access to God, governed the life of the church throughout a significant part of church history, until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, when Martin Luther recovered the buried biblical truth of the “priesthood of all believers” – which is exactly what Peter is saying here. Because of what Jesus has done for us as both the perfect high priest and the perfect sacrifice for sin (see Hebrews 4-10), there is no longer any need for a priestly intermediary to speak to God on our behalf. Jesus is the only intermediary we need. Through Him, we now have direct access to God the Father and may “approach the throne of grace with confidence,” there to “receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). I urge you to memorize Hebrews 4:16 if you have not already committed it to memory. It will provide you with direction, comfort, and encouragement in your life as a follower of Jesus.

That we have direct access to God in prayer means that we are not dependent on any earthly mediator to go to God on our behalf. But this does not mean that we cannot or should not pray for one another. To pray for one another and for others is one of the great privileges of belonging to Jesus Christ and being part of His church. You can pray for me – and I am so grateful for your many prayers on my behalf. Please don’t stop praying for me. I can also pray for you. We can pray for each other. We can pray for a world full of needy and spiritually lost people. You know what it says in Philippians 4:6 – another Bible verse you would do well to memorize: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” As “a royal priesthood,” that is your calling and mine.

A HOLY NATION

In addition, God has called us out of the world to be “a holy nation.” The word for holy is *hagios*. When it is used of God, it refers to His other-ness, the idea that God is completely different from us by virtue of His moral perfection and the glory that belongs to Him because

of all the attributes of His character. Applied to us, the idea of holiness means that we have been set apart by God for a special purpose. We have been chosen, called out, and set apart from the world around us *by* God and *for* God. To do God's will and to serve His purposes *in* the world.

God has placed us *in* the world. We are not here by accident. He sends us *into* the world as His messengers and agents. Yet, as Jesus prayed for His disciples in John 17, we are not *of* the world (John 17:14-18). Though we remain *in* the world, we do not belong to the world. We belong to God. In this prayer, Jesus did not ask the Father to remove His followers from the world. Instead, He asked the Father to protect and preserve them – us – from Satan, the arch-enemy of our souls (17:15).

Chuck Swindoll describes our circumstances in this world as “citizens of heaven living in hostile territory” (Swindoll, *Insights from John*, 290). In many places around the world, it is hostile territory for followers of Christ and the Christian faith, and has been for a long time. We see the cultural and political landscape of our own country becoming less and less tolerant of and increasingly hostile to Christian beliefs and Christian moral teachings. So, do we just give up, abandon the truths and teachings of the Bible, and go with the prevailing cultural winds? No. Please no. Do we withdraw from the world into a separate Christian sub-culture? No. Jesus did not ask the Father to *isolate* His followers from the world but to *insulate* us, to give us spiritual protection against the world and its lies while we are living in it (Swindoll, 292).

As members of Christ's church, we are living stones in the spiritual house He is building in this world (1 Peter 2:5). We are a people chosen and called out of the world by God. We are royal priests in the service of our God and King. We are a holy race, set apart by God for His purposes. As members of Christ's church, we belong to God – each one of us and all of us whose hope is in Christ and Him alone. We are God's instruments to do His work and to declare His praises at all times in everything we do (2:9).

ALIENS AND STRANGERS

One last thing: As Peter says in verse 11, and as Jesus showed in His prayer for His disciples, we are “aliens and strangers in the world.” This world, as attached to it as we all are, is not our home. This nation, as much as we love it, is not and never was the kingdom of God here on earth. Though we live in the world, we do not belong to the world. And we must be careful not to let the world have its way in us. As an evangelist named J. Wilbar Chapman once said: “It's not the boat in the water but the water in the boat that sinks it. So it's not the Christian in the world but the world in the Christian that constitutes the danger” (Quoted in *Men of Integrity*, May/June 2004).

We are called to live *in* the world. The church lives its life and carries out its worship, work, and witness *in* the world. But we are called by God to be different from the world. We are called by God to be salt and light in the world. We have been chosen, called, set apart, and commissioned by God to be His people and to serve His purposes in the world.

YOUR RESPONSE

How are we doing as a church? How are you doing as a church member? Do you just come to church, or are you an active, functioning church member?

How are you doing as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? If you are not following Jesus, today is the day to repent of your unfaithfulness and come back to Him. If you have never embraced the gospel message and put your trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, today is the day to say yes to Him. You don't have to come forward in response to an altar call. You don't have to raise your hand. Just say yes to Jesus. Tell Him you're sorry for your sins and you know you can't save yourself. By faith, receive Him as your Savior and Lord. Receive the forgiveness He freely gives. Invite Him to come and take up residence in your life. Ask Him to take charge of your life and to use you, along with all of us, to serve and glorify Him in all you do and say.

Together, in the name of Jesus, may we be the church He has called and equipped us to be, so that maybe, just maybe, people in the world around us may see the difference that knowing Jesus has made and continues to make in our lives. And maybe, just maybe, to the glory and praise of God, some of them may believe the gospel and become followers of the Lord Jesus with us.

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