

Basics of the Faith 4: Priesthood of All Believers

1Peter 2:4-10

February 2, 2020

Knowing who we are is really important. Who we are, is usually shaped by our DNA, our original family, and our social context. Therefore, it seems to me that knowing who we are provides a stability and framework for life. So, do we know who we are?

Peter tells these Christians and us: *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. (1Peter 2:9-10)*

Peter is reminding them who they belong to, a reminder they needed living as they were under Rome. Its laws and gods made these Christians stand out as atheists. The Roman gods, including Caesar demanded allegiance. In such a climate it's not hard to imagine being tempted to defect from the faith. Peter's description of their identity as belonging to Christ, not Caesar was a reminder of who they were. They, like us, had been called out from their family of origins, from the gods they used to worship, to belong to another family. This new family, the church, is now the community where they and us find our identity, where we mature as adults. We are now, Peter says, like little stones in God's temple and connected by faith to the living stone, Jesus: *let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1Peter 2:5)*

My son and I entered the district of Ueno by train, an old district in the north east corner of Tokyo. It stands in marked contrast to the bustling, neon lit areas of Shibuya far to the south where the young crowd parade around the streets of restaurants and stores. Entering Ueno was like entering a different world from the Shibuya district where I was staying. In Ueno there is a hushed, older world of narrow streets, stately parks, museums, and gardens. As we wander these old lanes there is a quiet that is quite beautiful, a relief from the noise and crowds. On every street we seem to pass small cemeteries and

shrines. In one of the doorways to a cemetery I pause and find myself drawn inside. Two women sit talking quietly on a bench. They seem friendly and smile at me and even say good day in English. I am fascinated by the graves. The cemetery is small, like the others we have seen. But what are strange are the sticks pointing to the sky that emerge from every grave.

These sticks are about four to six feet high pieces of wood, about six inches across, imprinted in Japanese writing. We ask what it means. They tell us that these are writings from the family members. These are prayers, hopes for the future, and blessings to all who come after them. These sticks mark their identity as a family who lived and died in this ancient area of Tokyo.

Perhaps it was the quiet, hushed atmosphere of Ueno itself, or perhaps the peace of this secluded graveyard, but this moment came back to me as I thought about our subject for this morning. The graves were so small; just one small stone in the ground containing the jars of dust that once were proud people who walked these narrow lanes. Now they lay buried inside the stone, silent, perhaps forgotten. Only the sticks spoke now. These sticks spoke to us of their belief in their ancestors' power to help them in life.

Like these Christians in this letter, Israel too is feeling that God has deserted them. Isaiah has to remind them: *O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. (Isaiah 43:1ff)*

God has named us as his own. This is who we are. Similarly, Peter is reminding these Christians that they are loved by God; they belong to Christ! Once they were like everyone else in the Roman province, but the Gospel created a new identity. So “belonging” is an important theme of this passage.

But with this new identity comes responsibility. We now belong to a community of believers who together are God's priesthood. What does that mean?

The Reformers, Luther and Calvin among them, argued against Rome's distinction between laity and clergy. Instead, they wrote, all who belong to Christ through faith and baptism share in the priesthood of Jesus. That doesn't mean every Christian ought to be a pastor and teacher. But we belong to the Priesthood of all believers.

Peter says Christians 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.

We are priests, standing before God on behalf of a lost world, offering prayers and conduct that witness to the truth. Like the recipients of this letter we too need to remember who we are and live out our faith accordingly.

That sounds way too religious and demanding! How can I represent God to my neighbour and my neighbor to God? My dear wife Gail never ceases to remind me that **we** are church to our grandchildren. My duty is of course to be a loving grandparent. Yes, but more, I am to pray and live before them so that they may be won to the kingdom. I am also their priest!

The priesthood of all believers is central to the church. We are all priests to one another; we intercede for one another and proclaim the Word to one another; we celebrate God's presence among us in worship, praise, and fellowship. It propels us into the world in service and witness.

We all want to belong. But to what? Who am I? As I reflected on these sticks pointing into the Japanese sky, I wondered what they said to me. How I longed to belong to a family of origin that had been closer, more loving, more spiritually aware. But now I belong to a different family. And these sticks spoke to me of the human longing for blessing, for family identity, for eternal life.

The promise of the living stone that holds up the entire Christian family and identifies us as one, is that our voices will never be silenced, that death is defeated, that Jesus is the way, truth and life toward this hope.

What will our writings above our graves say? Remember who you are, who you now belong to, and live out that calling as God's people. Once we were not part of this family. But now, by God's grace we are. It is the living stone at the centre of this great construction project that began so long ago that gives shape and life to the whole building of which you and I are part. It is a growing, living building, not dead and settled. It is dynamic, fruitful, life-giving, open, answering all the yearnings of the human heart. This is who we are and who we belong to.

Amen