

STRANGE PEOPLE, IN A STRANGE LAND

1 Peter 2:4-12

INTRODUCTION

Have you heard of a subgroup in the U.S. called the Irish Travelers? They are a minority that pretty much stays by themselves. They came over from Ireland in the mid 1800s and, from the very beginning, they stayed apart from the rest of society. About 10 – 20,000 Travelers are estimated to be in the U.S. Many of them live in South Carolina and Texas, but there are some here in Hudson that I'm aware of. The men travel all over doing a variety of odd jobs, like repair work and asphalt paving. To the general public, they are suspect because they don't try to fit into the U.S. culture. They keep to themselves, intermarry among their own, and keep apart in their version of Catholic worship. At times they are persecuted.

Back in the first century, the early Christians were also seen as a small, foreign group that didn't fit in with the Roman and Greek societies. They had values that kept them away from cultural events, like the worshiping of the Roman and Greek gods. They didn't attend some events because of the immorality and excess that went on in them. As a result, they were often persecuted or marginalized.

It was into a culture like this that Peter is writing to Christians and seeking to encourage them to not lose heart, not to give up living as Christians, and not to separate from the people they are trying to reach out to with God's love, even in the face of persecution.

That sounds a lot like what is happening today in our country. Christians are targeted because they refuse to bake cakes for homosexual weddings. Events like the Pro-life march a couple of weeks ago in Washington D.C. are barely covered and certainly given little objective coverage by the media. Christian views and Christian values are repressed and any attempt to support a policy by quoting the Bible is met with ridicule.

The way Peter seeks to encourage the people is by helping them see their true identity. Peter attempts to expand the people's identity from that of a small, foreign, persecuted minority to a grand view of themselves who are part of God's plan for history and eternity. He wants to help them understand their identity as God's people and how that relates to society around them.

And similarly, God wants us to understand that this identity is our identity as well.

The point is that Jesus gives us a new identity that alters the direction of our lives in three relationships.

First:

I. We have a new identity in our relationship with God (4-5, 9-10)

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ 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. ...⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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. 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10^{NIV}

Peter mentions three parts of our identity with God. First,

A. We are a chosen race

But you are a chosen people... 1 Peter 2:9^{NIV}

God has chosen us to be part of his people, his family. I don't understand how that all worked. We certainly didn't do anything to merit God choosing us. We get a partial answer from what God told the Israelites why he chose them:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery. Deuteronomy 7:7-8^{NIV}

God chose the Israelites simply because he chose to love them. That's it. They were nothing special as a people. God had chosen Abraham and made a promise to him to raise up a nation. And God was faithful to keep his promise.

God has chosen you to become a Christian. Again, I don't understand how that all worked. But here's what I want you to understand. God loves you. You are so precious to God that he purposefully chose you to be his child. That should make you feel really special.

Secondly,

B. We are God's possession

We are his people. We belong to God.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. ... Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; 1 Peter 2:9-10^{NIV}

We now are his possession. This reminds us that we are not free to simply do whatever we want. We belong to God, and God has plans and purposes for us.

A third identity is that:

C. We are recipients of his mercy

...once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:10^{NIV}

In this letter Peter wrote, he had just encouraged the believers to grow up in their salvation because they had tasted that the Lord is good. The Lord is good. And the fact

is that at one time, we were not the people of God; we had not received mercy. But when God called us, it was an act of pure mercy. Instead of continuing to let us wander around in darkness and making a mess of our lives, God mercifully reached out to us, brought us to himself, and set us on the path of life. That is mercy.

Do you see how significant this identity is? One day, it is going to be revealed how significant our identity when Jesus comes back and welcomes us into his Kingdom.

A second direction of our identity is:

II. We have a new identity in our relationship with other believers

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ 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. 1 Peter 2:4-5 ^{NIV}

We are:

A. Living stones being built in a spiritual house

We looked last week at our relationship with one another, and how we are to love one another like family members. But this picture refers to our relationships with one another in relationship to God. God is building us into a spiritual house, a spiritual temple. In this picture, we are not each, individual spiritual temples, but we are one house, one temple.

Let me draw out some applications.

First, what is so important in this picture is that our faith is a joint faith. There is no such thing as private Christianity. One commentator referred to it this way: *As Christians, we are living stones, but you don't see stones just laying aside and not used when they are being used to build a building. Each stone is fitted in with the other stones to make one building.* When a person becomes a follower of Jesus, they are a living stone that is shaped to be put into the one structure that God is building. And this one structure is God's Church. When you become a Christian, you become part of the church and you have a part to play in the church.

E.g. U2's Bono's comment on not going to church.

Secondly, a temple represents a place of holiness.

B. Built together into a holy temple

Have you ever walked into one of the great cathedrals in Europe and felt a hush among the people? It is just a natural response in walking into a cathedral. It is a temple dedicated to God, and there is a reverence that comes from the building. It would be totally out of character to walk into a cathedral and start running around talking in a loud voice.

One aspect of our being together should be to promote holiness among us. When we get together as God's people, we should promote holiness simply by our presence with

one another. That doesn't mean we don't laugh and have fun. I imagine many of you are going to Super Bowl parties with other Christians today. That should be lots of fun, especially as we watch the Patriots annihilate the Rams! But when we get together, we should encourage each other to speak and act in holy ways.

We don't expect people to come to Trinity and instantly be perfect. People bring in all their sins with them. But, over time, being a part of Trinity should make a difference in their lives. They should begin to change sinful habits and sinful speech to become more holy.

Thirdly,

III. We have a new identity in our relationship with nonbelievers

We have a priest here at Trinity. His name is Chris. He is a pontifex. That is the Latin word for priest, which literally means bridge builder. Chris is a bridge builder by profession. He designs and builds bridges. He is, literally, a priest.

Spiritually speaking, we all are bridge builders. We are to build bridges to people around us who are not followers of Jesus.

But you are ... 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.
1 Peter 2:9 ^{NIV}

As priests, as bridge builders, we are to:

A. To reveal God's greatness

As Peter says, we are to declare his praises. Another translation says we are to proclaim his excellencies.

I think how we live the Christian life, and whether a person wants to become a Christian, comes down to their view of God. When you see how great and wonderful God is, how can you not love him? When you have a view of God that reflects how much he loves us, how caring and compassionate he is, how wise and good he is—how can a person not want to know him and have him as one's heavenly Father?

One of the ways Satan works is to put God in a bad light. That's what he first did with Eve in the Garden. He made her question the goodness of God.

Our job, as bridge builders, is to help people have a right understanding and view of God.

Something you might do this week—call it a homework assignment from your pastor—is to ask several people you work with or go to school with, what they think of God, and then just listen. I think you might be surprised. And maybe, God will help build a bridge to them.

As bridge builders, we are also to:

B. To reveal God's plan for them

Until recent times, when you were going to build a building or temple, the most

important stone in that building was the cornerstone. This stone had to be perfectly cut and was the first stone set in place. It determined the three directional lines of the foundation because every stone that was then put into place was aligned and leveled with the cornerstone.

In this spiritual temple that God is building, Jesus himself is the cornerstone. The whole plan of God depends on Jesus. Peter then makes this application for nonbelievers. What you do with and think about Jesus is going to determine your eternal destiny.

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.”*

⁷ *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,”*

⁸ *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. 1 Peter 2:6-8^{NIV}

Those people who trust in Jesus, God will honor. But to those who reject Jesus, who disobey or reject the message about Jesus, they will fall in the judgement. As bridge builders, we are to help people see how essential it is to understand who Jesus is and what he has done for us. It determines their whole eternity.

And then, as bridge builders, we are to:

C. To reveal the kind of life God wants to give to all people

Not only do we have this message about the greatness of God and the message about Jesus to proclaim, our witness to nonbelievers is to be seen through our lives.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 1 Peter 2:11-12^{NIV}

The people in Peter’s day slandered the Christians because of their behavior. Two Roman historians of the Early Church expressed the common feelings of the people toward the Christians: The Roman writer Suetonius, who lived in the late first century considered Christianity to be ‘a mischievous superstition.’ Tacitus, a Roman historian and Senator who lived around the same time, similarly described Christianity as ‘a dangerous superstition and Christians as a race detested for their evil practices.’ The Christians may have wanted to retaliate. But Peter told them not to. Instead, the Christians were to live such good, moral lives that the people would see their good

deeds and honor God.

That's great advice for us today. Peter says change people's opinion by the way you act. I can't help but think, when we live a godly life, full of joy, full of purpose, with the ability to live a good, moral life, other people will want to live this kind of life, too.

Next Steps: