

5th Sunday of Eastertide

Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; I Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14 is the opening to an extended discourse by Jesus (14:1—16:33) that interrupts the story line of the Gospel of John. However, it is not a disrupting insertion, but rather a further extension of the story itself for it is integral to the primary story line of this book. This extended section is often called the “Farewell Discourse of Jesus”, because that is what it is. It follows the literary form of that day of the farewell or last testament of a famous man as he prepares his followers for his departure. Examples of this farewell form in scripture are found in Gen. 49 (Jacob), all of Deuteronomy (Moses) and I Chronicles 28-29 (David). The purposes of such a farewell discourse are to comfort the followers of the great man, to help them understand the significance of his life and death, and to lay out future directions or directives for the community he has founded. That is exactly what happens in this Farewell Discourse of Jesus. Today’s Gospel Lesson seeks to accomplish primarily the first objective and begins to address the second.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going” (14:1-4).

“Do not let your hearts be troubled”. Jesus’ primary concern is not for himself but for his disciples. He wants them to truly understand what is about to happen to him and to perceive it, not finally as tragedy but as triumph. He wants them to realize that it is in and through his death that their community of faith will become indeed a *community* of faith and not just a collection of faithful individuals.

The key to understanding this passage is to understand what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of “my Father’s house”. It is traditionally interpreted as being a reference to heaven. But there is nowhere else in scripture where Jesus calls heaven “my Father’s house”. It is used exclusively by Jesus for the Jerusalem Temple (Jn. 2:16; Luke 2:49; 19:45; Mark 11:17; Matt. 21:13)! But the Gospel of John, up to this point, has made it very clear that Jesus is rejecting the physical Temple (because it has become irretrievably corrupted by the Judeans – the political, economic and religious powers of Israel using it for their own aggrandizement) and substituting for it the temple of his body. That is, Jesus’ body – the community of the church – has become “my Father’s house”. God is to be found in all God’s richness within the community of the church (see vss. 5-6). What Jesus is saying is that in the community of the Church, this countercultural community he has birthed and nurtured into being, is to be found the richness of God the Father. It is in this people of God gathered together by and through Jesus, that there are many “dwelling places”.

The Greek word translated “dwelling places” – *monai* – is particularly instructive. *Monai* doesn’t mean a house or permanent residence. Rather, it means a temporary place, a place to rest, eat and sleep while on a journey. It is an “inn” (or, in today’s language, a “motel” or “hotel”). Therefore, what Jesus is saying is that his people are a people on a journey, a people moving from darkness to light, from death to life, from slavery to liberation. They are people of

“the Way” (the title the Church gave to themselves; it was nonbelievers who called people of The Way “Christians”). Therefore, the gathering of God’s people is a temporary way-station for all of us on the journey of life. There are many of these “dwellings” so that Jesus goes before each Christian welcoming her or him into every such community of faith, as we together and individually make this journey of faith!

Jesus makes it clear that this is the truth he is sharing with his followers in the words that follow. “Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (14:5-7).

Like the traditional interpretation of “my Father’s house” as being heaven, so the traditional interpretation of this passage “Jesus is the Way” misses the point Jesus was making. For Jesus to call himself “the way, the truth and the life” was not a statement of exclusivity but of particularity! He is not making a critique of the relative worth of the other religions of the world. That would make no sense in this context. Jesus is not making a statement about Christianity vis-a-viz the Muslim faith or Buddhism or Hinduism (in fact, neither Islam nor Christianity even existed at that time, and there is little likelihood that Jesus even knew of Buddhism or Hinduism)!

What Jesus was seeking to do was to confirm and affirm to this, his faith community, that their entrusting of faith in him and their embracing of his dream of the kingdom of God was not a misguided action on their part. After his death, they would be tempted to think, “Jesus has failed. He didn’t bring in the kingdom of God and was certainly not the Messiah. He was misguided, and he got killed by the very forces he opposed. We have been deceived!” Consequently, what Jesus wanted them to recognize was that he was, indeed, their means of authentic access to God (“Once I was blind, but now I see”); thus, he was their “way” (ch. 10) or “gate” (ch. 10) to God and each other. Likewise, he wanted them to realize that he was to them the very embodiment of God and of God’s kingdom, for they were his community of faith (shepherd (ch. 10), resurrection and life (ch. 12), truth). Therefore, they could continue to trust in him, even when it appeared that all of life had tumbled in upon them.

Thus, what Jesus is saying here is that the Temple as both the location and the vehicle by which people met God has now been totally replaced. “The Way” is now no longer a system of belief, a religious building, a set-apart body of priests or the performance of rituals and liturgies. “The Way” is a Person! He, Jesus, is the Way to God. And that is because Jesus is the Truth and the Life (see John 1:4).

The logical conclusion, therefore, is obvious. Today’s Gospel lesson continues, “Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Phillip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves” (vss. 8-11).

To Philip's request, "Lord, show us the Father" (vs. 8), Jesus replies, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me". Jesus and the Father are one. To know one is to know the other! It is God who is at work through Jesus, because Jesus and God are one. In that reality, the disciples can therefore take comfort as they commit their lives and their future to Jesus – even as he faces death at the hands of the Judean systems!

It is in the light of Jesus' countercultural community (the Church) committing their lives and their future to Jesus and to Jesus' God, that Jesus now begins to change the focus of his Farewell Discourse. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, verses 12-14 conclude the paragraph beginning with verse 8. But they could just as well be made the first sentences in the paragraph the NRSV has made verses 15-17 (there are no paragraphs in the Greek original). For the author of this Gospel, John, begins a new thought – but a thought built upon the argument that has preceded it from 14:1-11.

Jesus switches his focus from both comforting his disciples and convincing them to the focus of committing their lives and the future of their community to the works they will do in following him. "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (vss. 12-14).

As Jesus' countercultural community (later to be called "the Church"), those who obediently follow Jesus as their "way, truth and life" will not only do the works of teaching the people, working for the physical, social, economic and political transformation of the people and calling the powerful and their systems to accountability. They will do "greater works than these". Jesus does not mean by this that each individual Christian or any individual Christian will surpass Jesus in miracle-making power. Rather, Jesus is focused upon his community of faith. He is saying that this community of faith will go geographically where he never went ("to the uttermost parts of the world") and collectively would accomplish far more healing, caring, works of justice and mercy and confronting of systems throughout the world than Jesus would ever be able to accomplish in one or even in several life-times. The Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, would do "greater works" both in territory and in number, because there would be so many followers of "the Way"!

Therefore, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (vss. 13-14). This is no *carte blanche*. Jesus is not saying that no matter what we ask but do it using the formula of Jesus' name, we will get! He is not proposing a magical formula that will give us everything we might ever want! What Jesus is saying is that to authentically pray in Jesus' name is to embrace all that Jesus stood for, and thus to identify with God's purpose for humanity. If, then, both as a Christian community and as individuals, we are seeking to faithfully carry out God's purposes for humanity, what we will ask for is not what we would as sinful people desire but only what God would desire. All that we would do would be to serve Jesus' community and to extend Jesus' shalom throughout the world. Thus, what we will ask for is God's shalom. And that request, of course, God will surely honor!

Acts 7:55-60 is the story of the death of Christianity's first martyr, Stephen. It is a very tightly-constructed story. "Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus, standing at the right hand of God. "Look", he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But Stephen's persecutors covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them". When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him" (Acts 7:55-60).

There are several important insights into this story that need to be highlighted. First, it is important to stipulate who was responsible for the death of Stephen. The text tells us that Stephen, "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). He was one of the seven Hellenist Christians chosen by the apostles to be deacons, and given the care and leadership of the Christian community (6:1-7). In doing so, Stephen "did great wonders and signs among the people", and consequently won great credibility among the Jewish peasants in Jerusalem and Israel as well as among the Christians. But the text tells us that "those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedman" instigated a riot, accusing Stephen of blasphemy. One must ask who were those "who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedman", and what was that synagogue?

The term consistently used in the Gospel of Luke as well as in Acts to refer to the leaders of a synagogue is "those in the synagogue" (Luke 4:28-30; 6:6-11; Acts 6:9). What is meant by talking about these people being "in" or "belonging" to the synagogue was not the idea that they happened to be present in the synagogue when this incident occurred – that is, an occasional or regular worshipper. Rather, these were people "of" the synagogue, those who had thoroughly bought into the way the Mosaic Law was being interpreted, lived out and applied in Israel that was creating a "super-class" of people who interpreted and implemented that Law, and thus benefited from it. It was, in essence, a designation for those who shaped and maintained the political, economic and religious order of Israel for the benefit of the powerful and learned.

Further, this text tells us that these leaders of Israel's status quo were "Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia" (6:9b). In other words, these were all Hellenist Jews – Jewish people who explicitly followed the Law but who lived (and perhaps had even been born) in Greek and Hellenist cities – just like Stephen! In other words, what Luke is telling us is that as long as the leadership of this emerging Christian movement was confined to Galilean and Judean Jews, it remained a local problem. But once Christian leadership devolved to Hellenist Jews from around the Empire, and their ministry proved popular (and even seductive) to the Hellenist people, Christianity had now suddenly become a threat to the worldwide Jewish power structure. Christianity was no longer Jerusalem's problem; it had become Athen's and Corinth's and Alexandria's problem as well! And if Christianity had formerly threatened the dominating political, economic and religious order of Israel, it now had begun to threaten the established order of Judaism throughout the Empire. Therefore, it had to be stopped.

What these Hellenist Jewish political/economic/religious leaders do to stop this threat to their power is to decide to stop the Hellenist Jewish Christian leader of that threat – Stephen. Thus, they foment a riot. And the riot has its desired effect: “The leaders of the Freedmen Synagogue stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted Stephen, seized him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin” (6:12). Stephen was now on trial before the highest Jewish court for the crime of heresy and blasphemy by declaring Jesus as the Christ!

The trial now begins. And Stephen is given permission to defend himself against the accusations brought against him. He does so in a brilliant speech that makes up most of the seventh chapter of Acts (7:2-53). Using the revered history of the Jewish people, Stephen demonstrates how the political, economic and religious leaders of Israel (the very people before whom he is making his defense), in their lust to remain in control and power, have never been able to discern God’s redemptive action in history and thus have repeatedly thwarted the intentions of God to build Israel into God’s shalom community and to work for the transformation of the world. He concludes, “You stiff-necked people (i.e., not the Jewish people, but the particular people he is addressing – Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders), uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it” (7:51-53).

The results of such an accusatory speech are predictable. “When they heard these things, the Sanhedrin became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen” (vs. 54). There was not even an order to execute him; there was a mass movement to execute him. Without bothering to reach a verdict, the enraged Sanhedrin swept out of their seats, picked up Stephen and carried him out of the hall and into the courtyard, picked up stones and began to stone him to death. The Empire was striking back!

Second, the execution of Stephen was for the crime of heresy, not for treason (as it was in Jesus’ situation). We can make that conclusion based upon the way each man was executed. Stephen dies by being stoned to death; Jesus was executed through crucifixion. It was not true (as is generally believed today) that the Jewish leadership could not execute someone. They could – but only for the crimes of heresy and blasphemy. The Mosaic Law was specific about the rights of Israel’s religious leaders to execute for heresy and blasphemy (Lev. 24:11-16; Exod. 22:27). Heresy and blasphemy (6:10-11), plus the crime of speaking against the Temple and against the Law, are the crimes of which Stephen is accused (6:13-14). And Rome had granted to the Sanhedrin the right to execute people for these crimes after an appropriate trial (which Stephen received; it simply was that it didn’t end in an orderly manner). This was the significant difference between Stephen’s trial and death, and Jesus’ trial and death – for Jesus was executed as a revolutionary plotting the overthrow of Rome and its replacement with “the Kingdom of God”. Therefore, his execution would be a Roman execution, reserved only for traitors.

Third, although their crimes, respective executions and the “Powers” that saw to their respective executions were different, the other parallels between Jesus and Stephen that are described by Luke are startling. Luke tells us that both Jesus and Stephen were full of “grace” (Luke 2:40;

4:22; Acts 6:8) and of “power” (Luke 4:14, 26; 5:17; 24:19; Acts 6:8). They both “did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8; 2:22; Luke 10:13; 19:37). Both Jesus and Stephen are brought before the Sanhedrin for trial (Luke 22:66; Acts 6:12-15). Both use their respective trials to “speak truth to power”, calling them to accountability (Luke 22:66-23:12; Acts 7:1-53). Both enrage the Sanhedrin who know they are hearing the truth but must violently dismiss it (Luke 23:13-25 [note that Luke is careful to point out that it is “the chief priests and leaders” who become enraged and forcefully demand the death of Jesus]; Acts 7:54-58). Both Jesus and Stephen see a comforting vision of God that confirms the rightness of what they are doing (Luke 4:22; Acts 7:56). In fact, Stephen’s declaration, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” is a fulfilling statement of Jesus’ statement to the Judean Powers-that-Be, “I am the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62), thus authenticating what Jesus had earlier stated at his trial and consequently condemning the Sanhedrin. Just as Jesus offered a final prayer on the cross, entrusting his spirit to God (Luke 23:46; cf. Ps. 30:6), so Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59). And just as Jesus’ final words were those of forgiveness for his executors (Luke 23:34), so Stephen died with the words on his lips, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60). The parallels drawn by Luke between Jesus and Stephen are both obvious and clearly intentional. In both his life and death, Stephen is truly being a “Christ-one”! And the implication is that we are called to be such “Christ-ones”, as well.

Finally, this story introduces Saul, who will later become Paul the Apostle. It tells us two things about Saul. First, “They began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58). Second, “And Saul approved of their killing Stephen” (8:1).

These are not casual statements. Nor is Saul an innocent bystander who simply becomes an impromptu coat stand for the executors’ cloaks. What is meant by this statement was that Paul was in some way involved in the death of Stephen. We don’t know what he specifically did, whether it was to bring accusation against Stephen or to incite the people to riot or to be a part of the mob. But the implication of this passage is that Saul was standing in the foreground of the pit where Stephen was going to be stoned, both receiving the cloaks of the strong young men who would be Stephen’s executioners and supervising that execution. Luke wants to make that clear by stating a few sentences later, “And Saul approved of their killing Stephen” (8:1), followed by his actions, “But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison” (8:3). Thus, we are introduced to Paul and to the miracle of redemption that would make this persecutor and executor of the “Christ-ones”, Christianity’s future great advocate and evangelist!

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 is a portion of a psalm that prays for deliverance from one’s enemies. It centers on God’s care and support of the Psalmist in the midst of suffering or persecution. Such passages include “You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me” (vs. 3), or “Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God” (vs. 5) or again “Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me, when I was beset as a city under siege. You heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help” (vss. 21-22). Verses such as these remind the reader of the protection and

shelter of God. It is not that trust in him rescues us from all of life's trials, for such trials fall upon us all. But it is that trust in God enables us to face into those trials so that they do not destroy us. For it is God's "steadfast love" that sustains us through the struggle.

However, the final two verses of this Psalter lesson for today (vss. 15-16) are a part of a larger section (vss. 9-16) that has precious little of such reference to God's sustenance. Instead, it presents the full fury of the persecution and suffering that the loyal servant of God must at times face as the Psalmist pleads with God for mercy.

"Be gracious to me, O Lord; for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around! – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life" (vss. 9-13).

The Psalmist cannot paint a more somber picture of a man or woman thoroughly beaten down by life, not only by the circumstances and the conditions that assail him, but also the opposition of those who are his regular companions who, sensing his vulnerability, move in for the kill! All seems totally hopeless.

But then comes the slightest glimmer of hope! "But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love" (vss. 14-16).

It is important to note that God has neither intervened to correct the situation nor has acted to buoy up the Psalmist. Rather, all that you have from the Psalmist is wishful thinking. He is choosing to trust in God – primarily because there is no other alternative available to him. He prays to God to "deliver me from the hand of my enemies" and begs God to "save me in your steadfast love". But it depends upon other verses than this scripture to determine that God does respond and sustains the Psalmist. These verses indicate no such action on the part of God – only a vague hope. But hope – especially God-centered hope is often the most appropriate expectation for much of life.

I Peter 2:2-10 is the epistle lesson for the 5th Sunday of Eastertide. It is a lesson that evokes in me a sweet memory.

It was my privilege to pastor a grand "tall-steeple" church in Chicago for seven years. That pastorate was most formative in my embrace of the strategies of community organizing as we sought to cope with a community in crisis and close to collapse. And that experience shaped the future direction of my ministry and of my life.

Edgewater Presbyterian Church had, at one time, been a church of significant stature in Chicago. Founded soon after the Civil War, by the 1920s it had grown into a congregation of over 1,500

occupying a magnificent Italian Renaissance building. It was known as “the silk-stocking church” of Chicago because it was in the middle of the most fashionable district of Chicago, next to Lake Michigan and had a wealthy congregation including eight millionaires.

But by the time I was called to become its senior pastor, the church and its neighborhood had fallen onto hard times. The congregation was only one-third its former membership. All its millionaires and most of its wealthy had long since departed. A faithful core of white, middle-class members commuted in to the church from the suburbs to which they had fled. But at least half of the congregation I inherited still lived in the neighborhood but also reflected the changes that had occurred to that neighborhood. They were now African, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Native-American and Appalachian whites and most were poor. The mansions that had once surrounded the church had mostly disappeared and had been replaced by four to six-story cheaply-constructed apartment buildings with full families crowding into one, two or three rooms. Our neighborhood had become the primary terminus for mentally-ill patients that had been dismissed from Illinois’ public mental hospitals that had been closed to save costs.

I was proud of how Edgewater Church responded with compassion to its neighborhood in a broad spectrum of ministries. This included a day-care center for the mentally ill, a clothing distribution center and care center, professional counseling and ombudsmen services for people looking for jobs or wrestling with problems too great for them to manage, and even a coffee house where people could gather out of Chicago’s cold, have a cup of coffee and talk with church members who would listen. It was because of the destitution of the neighborhood that our church and the other churches formed a community organization – the Organization of the North East (ONE) – that continues to this day, an organization that enabled the people and institutions to confront the political and economic powers of Chicago to protect the interests of the people and to defend the poor.

But perhaps the ministry of Edgewater Church about which I was most proud was a liturgy that somehow worked its way into our Sunday worship. As our congregation gathered for worship, I would look out on a bag lady sitting next to a dowager, a mentally ill person in his own world sitting near a business man, a young upwardly-mobile adult sitting next to a worn-out and grizzled African-American elder, and I would think “This is what the kingdom of God really is like”. And then I would stand and would step into the pulpit. And I would begin every Sunday morning worship with the same question, “Who are we who gather here?” Every Sunday, the congregation would spring to life as they answered in the strongest voice imaginable, “We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that we may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Pet. 2:9, RSV). And for one brief shining moment, that motley crew of the rejected of the earth became God’s own people, standing tall, singing bold, and proclaiming who, in reality, they truly were!

In this passage, Peter uses a number of metaphors to describe the church. He likens each Christian to a “living stone” and all of us together as “a spiritual house” that is “a holy priesthood” offering “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (vss. 4-5). Thus, he sees the church as a temple that rivals the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, with each Christian a strategic part of the building that Jesus built. For this is not a temple of brick but a temple of people – a temple of “living stones”. In using this metaphor, Peter was alluding to a

frequent concept used throughout the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 118:22, Isa. 28:16, 8:13-14), by Jesus (Matt. 21:42; John 1:4) and in the writings of Paul the Apostle (I Cor. 3:16-17; II Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22; I Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6) of God's people as living stones of a building that is designed for the praise of God. In fact, Peter quotes Isa. 28:16 and 8:13-14 directly in this passage (I Pet. 2:6-8).

But even richer metaphors are left for what is the high point of this passage, the scripture that so inspired the "motley crew" of my Chicago congregation. "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" (I Pet. 2:9-10).

This passage has two distinct emphases to it. The first emphasis is Peter's witness to what the Church is called by God to be. He uses specific terms to refer to the church. We are "a chosen race", "a royal priesthood", "a holy nation", "God's own people", "you who have received mercy".

Each term is significant, and has been carefully chosen by the author. First, we Christians are "a chosen race". Peter is referring directly to Exodus 19:4-5. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." It is not so much that we choose God as God chooses us. And in this passage, Peter is reminding this "motley crew" of Christian peasants that they have been chosen by God – called out from the priorities and standards of the world and called in to this new community of people at-one with God and each other.

Second, we are "a royal priesthood". This continues the reference to Exodus 19. Verse 6 states, "But you, Israel, shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." What Israel was once called to be, now the Church is called to be. We, too, are "a royal priesthood", those who have access to God to offer God our worship, our work and our selves.

Third, we are "a holy nation". In Exodus 19:6, God directly refers to Israel as "a holy nation". But this is a theme throughout scripture, perhaps most beautifully expressed in Deut. 7:6, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession". To be "holy" means to be "set apart", to be chosen and dedicated to a particular use.

Fourth, Peter calls the church "God's own people". This is better translated "a people for God's own possession". We are those whom God covets, whom God wants to possess. This expresses almost the sense of God's addiction to us and to a relationship with us. God yearns after us and wants us as God's own. This, again, is a theme throughout the Hebrew Bible (cf. Deut. 7:6, Isa. 43:21, Mal. 3:17). That this is the most important indicator of God's love for us is manifested in the fact that Peter cannot help but return to that designation a total of three times. First, he calls us "God's own people". Second, he reiterates, "Once you were not a people, but now you are

God's people". Third, to strengthen what he has just proclaimed, he writes, "Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy".

What is significant about these four titles that Peter gives to the Church is that they are all Old Testament titles. What Peter has done has been to apply to the Church the Hebrew Bible's terms for Israel. By doing this, Peter extends the work of Yahweh in the Old Testament to the Christians of the New Testament. He includes the Church in the people of God in order to assert that God's chosen consist of those who were called out by God in the Old Covenant under Moses and in the New Covenant under Jesus. We are all one people, a holy nation of both Old Testament worthies and New Testament Christians and their progeny elected by Yahweh (see Hebrews 11:1-12:2)!

But for what have we been elected? The second emphasis of this passage is what the Church is called by God to do. Peter continues, "in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9b). Being chosen by God is not so much privilege as it is responsibility! You have been saved to serve. You are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" so that you will act upon that chosenness, and "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light". The sign that you are chosen is that you want to serve your new Master by reaching out in both compassion and passion to the world. The Church is not the church unless it is a Servant Church, a church on behalf of others, a church that both longs and works hard to bring this world "out of darkness into God's marvelous light".

The Church is mission. And being in mission is to most profoundly be the Church. It is to such single-mindedness in working for the transformation of the world into God's kingdom of shalom that we are called to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"!

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