

1 Peter 3:13-22 “Chosen”

There's one thing that drives absolutely crazy about some preachers and that's when they think they have to start their sermon out with some corny joke to get people's attention. We're in the business of proclaiming the Word ... we're in the business of delivering the good news of the saving acts of Jesus. Sure there may be room for a parable or an amusing true-to-life story somewhere in the delivery, but to start out a sermon with a joke that has some lame punch-line? Tacky. That being said ...

A priest was talking to a group of kids about being good and going to heaven. At the end of his talk, he asked, “So where do you want to go?” Little Lisa jumped up and yelled “Heaven! I want to go to heaven!” So the priest says, “Very good. And what do you have to be to get there?” Little Johnny jumps up and says, “Dead!”

A lawyer, a priest, and a young boy were in a plane that was going to crash, but they only had 2 parachutes. The lawyer said that since he was the smartest person on the plane, he deserved to survive. So he just grabbed a chute and jumped. The priest looked and the little boy, reflected back on his life, and told the boy to take the last parachute since he had already lived a satisfying life. The boy said, “Oh, you're fine. You take this other chute because the smartest guy on the plane just jumped out with my book bag.”

Sorry ... one more. A young priest goes to work at his first parish. He's really nervous about hearing confessions so he asks this older priest to sit in on his sessions. The new priest hears a couple of confessions, then the old priest stops him and asks him to step out of the confessional for some constructive feedback. The old priest says, “Okay, when you hear these confessions, cross your arms over your chest, and rub your chin with one hand. Try saying things like, ‘Yes, I see ... go on.’ Or maybe, ‘I understand, and how did you feel about that?’ Now show me you can do that. The new priest tries it out. The old priest says, “Very good.

Now ... don't you think that's a little better than slapping your knee and saying, 'Oh my gosh! No kidding!? What happened next?'"

See, one joke is tacky. Three adequately prepares you for the theme today which is priesthood. Disciples pastors aren't called "priests." Every now and then someone calls me "Father," but I correct them. Unless it's one of my kids of course. Some of us aren't even comfortable with the title, "Reverend" because our founders didn't like formal titles. We were born on the American Frontier. We're the first home-grown Protestant denomination in fact and what set us apart from all the other "imported" church traditions was that we considered all of our members ministers. If you notice, our bulletin lists "all the people" as ministers and Katy and I as pastors. That's because we, along with the Church of the Bretheren and a few other denominations, affirm what we call "the priesthood of all believers." It's one of the three sacred rituals we practice along with baptism and the Lord's Supper. So you see how seriously we take this. And we use the scripture that Georgeanne read as one of the foundational texts for this idea.

Now ... even though we believe in the priesthood of all believers, we value education, training, and preparation among our clergy. In fact, it's required for ordination. But we also want our lay members to be educated about the scriptures too. Back in the early days of our movement, pastors were more like missionaries. They would establish congregations in a particular geographical area and work with them until they could afford full-time pastors. So, for example Chester Bullard, the church planter my wife wrote about for her graduate thesis, founded four congregations all up and down the New River Valley which meant he might only show up to preach at any of these churches once a month. So for the other three weeks, worship was led by lay people. Which doesn't seem terribly unusual for *us* because that's what we do, but back in those days we were seen as the weirdos among the frontier churches. Especially when it came to communion. Not only did we have communion weekly, but more often than not it was administered by lay people. Now when you consider that in most traditions the priest is the

only one who can administer or even *touch* the elements, this was a *big* deal. But for a church that affirms and practices the priesthood of all believers, we thought it was an important statement to demonstrate how serious we were about being part of this priesthood. We didn't just *say* it, we *lived* it!

Now it wasn't that our founders just grabbed any ol' person out of the congregation and said, "Hey, could you do communion this week?" That was something the elders did. And people *became* elders because the church body recognized the folks who had the best gifts and graces in a particular area of ministry and then nominated them to be elders. Now this is going to sound really strange to anyone who has ever served on our nominating committee, but the congregations used to nominate several people to serve one leadership position. So there might be six elder positions open and the committee would nominate like 20 people. That's 20 people who actually said, "yes" to just being considered for the nomination. And the congregation had to thoughtfully and prayerfully choose from among the candidates and vote for six. Out of twenty! These days a nominating committee has to be formed in February ... and I'm talking February 1st ... so that they can sweet-talk and cajole enough people into saying "maybe" so that we can have a mostly full-slate of leaders by the congregational meeting in November! But even though only 12 people could be elders, *everyone* was expected to be a part of some aspect of the ministry in the church. You couldn't just sit in the pews. Now some churches are just fine with people sitting in pews. In fact, that's preferable! After all, it could be dangerous to have people out there asking questions or thinking or doing ... things. But we affirm, and *require* folks to *be* the priesthood of all believers!

So back to this passage in 1st Peter. The writer tells believers to come to Jesus and be like Jesus. Jesus, who although he was like the stone that the mortal builders rejected, he was precious in God's sight. But Jesus was rejected by the ones who built mortal houses. For the ones who built *spiritual* houses, he was the chief cornerstone. The one that lined up all the other stones so the house could be plumb and strong. And we, the

body of Christ, are the other stones who line up with Jesus. And that's why we can be considered part of a royal priesthood. We align ourselves with Jesus. But here's the catch. In the same way that Jesus was rejected by the builders of mortal houses, we will be too. But why would the builders reject Jesus? Because Jesus, the corner stone, was *not* a power of this world. Jesus was a divine power ... a power of the kingdom of Heaven. He represented values that were ... different.

See, the power of the world is constantly pushing its agenda on us. Every day we are fed media messages from the time we wake up until we go to bed. We get it on our TVs, when we check on our phones or Facebook Pages, when we listen to podcasts, or read newsfeeds or newspapers. We get it even when we see the tabloids in the checkout line. We are targets of marketing. We are instructed about what we need and what we should have. We are told that we're missing out on things. And if we're not careful, this becomes our guiding principle. Someone asks, "How are you doing?" and you think, "Well that depends. According to the world's message, I need to get (x) because if I have (x) then I'll be happy." But Jesus calls us to a *different* kind of power. One that can't be controlled or tamed. It's a "wild power."

Now back to our being priests. What is the purpose of a priest? A priest is one who is authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion. In the Jewish tradition, priests all came from a particular family lineage. If you were a priest, that meant your dad and grandfather were priests too as well as some of your children and grandchildren. It's a lineage, sort of like the English monarchy. So back in 1st peter 2 when the writer says, "You are a royal priesthood" the readers clearly understood the implication. "We're *all* a royal priesthood?" Yes. "So that means we're all authorized to perform the sacred rituals and religious rites of our faith." Yes it does. "So ... let's see ... that's animal sacrifices, wheat and grain sacrifices, harvest sacrifices ... wow there wouldn't be much food if we *all* did that!" You're right, being a priest involves sacrifices. But what did the prophets say about ritual sacrifice? And I'll give you a hint ... think Micah. "Oh! 'With what shall I come before the Lord, and

bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give you my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O Mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God!” That’s right! And what does Jesus say about what’s most important about sacrifices? “Oh yeah, he tells us to be careful about our priorities. He was calling out the Scribes and Pharisees for tithing mint, dill and cumin, but neglecting the weightier matters of the law.” Right. And do you remember what he said those weightier matters were? “Oh! Justice and mercy and faith!” Yes! Do you see a pattern here? Because this is your priestly duty. If you, by being a follower of the Risen Christ, are part of a royal priesthood, and priests fulfill sacred rituals and rites, what are the most important rites for you to carry out? “Ohhhhhh ... justice, mercy, and faith. Or walking humbly with God.”

And there you have it. Your priestly imperative. And since we affirm the priesthood of all believers, your job is to make sure that in everything you say ... and most importantly everything you do ... no matter what gifts and graces for ministry God has given you ... whether it’s serving, proclaiming, teaching, comforting the sick and downtrodden ... baking cookies, cleaning the gutters, running sound, leading music, feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the displaced, affirming and loving the marginalized, lifting others up in prayer ... your highest priority is justice, mercy, and humble faithfulness.” And thus is our priestly commission.