

May 7th, 2023

1 Peter 2:2-10 “God’s Own People”

I love it when folks come to Annual Gathering for the first time. Annual Gathering used to be called a “State Assembly” back in the day. It’s when all the Disciples of Christ churches in Northern California and Nevada come together to do business and have fun. But when it comes to Annual Gathering, I find myself falling into the same trap that folks in a lot of our local congregations do. I long for the “good old days” when we held our assemblies at the Asilomar retreat center in Pacific Grove. I think, “Oh, I miss the 300+ people we used to have in the meeting hall and how we’d take walks on the beach in the evening and watch the sun set and go eat finger food at whatever organization was holding a reception.” See, I’m so focused on all the things *I* miss. But when someone attends Annual Gathering for the first time, they see all the *good* things because they don’t have anything to compare it to. Nancy Thompson went to her first Annual Gathering two weeks ago and one of the things she observed was how diverse our region is. We have Samoan churches, Hispanic churches, Black churches, Korean churches, big churches, small churches, urban churches, suburban churches, country churches and everything in between. We have different styles of worship, different mission priorities, different specialties in how we serve our communities. As a Region, we are diverse.

We in the local congregations come from different places too. Some of us come from out of state, some of us are native to Chico. Some of us grew up in big cities. Some grew up in the country. Some are here with a burning passion for social justice. Some are here just looking for sanctuary in a safe place where we can give and receive kindness. We’ve got business owners, farmers, teachers, social workers, medical professionals and so many different vocational paths represented here. We come healthy and sick. We come with various physical and mental health issues, painful life stories, and a variety of life experiences that shape who we are. We come with partners, spouses, siblings, pets, children, grandchildren, parents, or by ourselves. Sometimes we’re

quiet. Sometimes we're rowdy. We come with different tattoos ... or no tattoos. We come with joy and sorrow. We are an odd bunch, and I say that in a good way. We are a motley crew. Want to know where that term came from? And no, it's not the 80s hair-metal band I'm talking about. "Motley crew" refers to the crews of 17th- and 18th-century British ships that had sailors from all over the world. All churches are "motley crews" to some degree, but sometimes it's hard to celebrate the diversity that comes along with the title.

Throughout the history of the church, folks have asked, "Wouldn't it be nice if we were all a little more alike than different? Wouldn't it be nice if we all liked the same kind of music, or if we were all on the same page socially or politically? Wouldn't it be nice if we were all mature, demure, quiet, polite, soft-spoken, balanced and kind? Wouldn't it be ... I don't know ... *comfortable* if we never experienced frustration or conflict? Wouldn't it be wonderful if none of us had any ... *issues*? Maybe. But it wouldn't be church, would it?

The people of God have always been a motley crew. They've *never* fit together perfectly. Even in the earliest church communities, there were arguments and struggles over who belonged, and who didn't. There were arguments about women and men; Jews and Gentiles; slaves and free. On the one hand, women were hosts and sponsors and active leaders in early church; but on the other hand, women were told to be quiet and submit to men's authority. On the one hand, Gentiles were welcomed into the early church, just as they were; on the other hand, Gentiles were told they had to be circumcised first. Even as early as the end of the first century, there were lots of tensions in the church. Men and women; slave and free; Jews and Gentiles -- who belonged? The early Christian churches were formed from groups of people with radically different backgrounds and radically different expectations about how we should live. It was messy.

Now here in the 21st century, we live in a culture that doesn't have as many social taboos as the ones in the 1st and 2nd century. So it's difficult

for us to appreciate how remarkable it was that the early church was able to cross some of the social divides that existed in that time and place. For example, many early Christians identified as devout Jews. And for a devout Jewish man to eat alongside a Gentile was unheard of. Even worse would be a Jewish man who ate alongside a Gentile woman who was eating bacon. He would be, and feel, defiled; and he would be excluded from the temple and the rest of the Jewish community until he had undergone ritual purification. But this is exactly what participation in the church could lead to. Sharing a meal across social divides could have consequences that are difficult for us to even imagine. This morning, we heard just a little sample of Peter's letter to these scattered churches spread out within the territories of the Roman Empire. In this letter, he was trying to address what it means to be church and how to be Christian in diverse places and cultures. Even within this single letter, we see some of the tensions that were present in the first century church.

For example, Peter tells his readers that they are God's own people. Later, in a section that Kathy didn't read, he also says that God's people must obey the emperor, and that wives must obey their husbands. But the emperor demanded that his subjects fall flat on their faces and worship his statue as it was paraded through the streets. Could a Christian, who isn't supposed to worship graven images, truly obey the emperor when they're required to worship his statue? Probably not. And what about obeying *pagan* husbands? Pagan husbands could and would require their wives to make the necessary sacrifices to the ancestors, and to the household gods. That's what wives did. But God's people are commanded to worship no other gods. So could a Christian woman be fully obedient both to God and to her pagan husband? Again, probably not. In fact, one *cannot* obey God and obey the emperor; or obey God and obey one's pagan husband. And listen, I'm not picking on Peter, or the emperor, or pagan husbands here. I'm just trying to show you how conflicted even the early church was when it came to understanding how to be God's people. This group of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, free and slaves had trouble working out exactly how to do and be church even back then.

Even though two thousand years have passed, churches are *still* asking questions. These days, we're not arguing over how to include Gentiles, of whether they have to be circumcised if they want to be Christians. But there are plenty of lively conversations in churches about the leadership of women; about the leadership or inclusion of LGBTQ folks; about the rights of those who were baptized as infants versus adults; about what it means to welcome children; and so on. Who belongs? Who leads? Who has a say, or a voice, or a vote? What makes a church a church? And where are all the "normal" people? And what does that even mean? I find it very comforting to realize that questions like these have been asked for as long as the church has been around. So if we want some insight into what makes a church what it is, we might look back to its earliest days. And we will find that, despite conflict and confusion, the early church had some pretty good answers.

Let's go back to Peter's letter. In this section that Kathy read, he wrote: "Once, you were not a people." What does this mean? Well, the Greek word, λαος, means people or population. More precisely, it was often used to mean a group with common cultural bonds and ties. So when we are not a people, we're just a bunch of humans with nothing to hold us together. We're strangers in a crowd. A motley crew. And in many ways, in this and every church we are still a motley crew. Every week, we join together with people from all different places, who have different histories and different values and different expectations and different ways of communicating. And yet we have this one big thing in common: our faith in Jesus Christ. We are all here this morning because we have placed our trust in him; and many of us have been baptized in his name. Through this faith and this baptism, we have transcended our backgrounds and our culture. We have joined something new: The culture of God. And when we are a part of God's culture, we are no longer just a motley crew or just faces in the crowd. By joining together we become God's own people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. Of course it doesn't always feel like it. This is because we're human, and flawed, and still in this never-ending process of embracing and

embodying God's culture. And yet just by joining together, we are already God's people, ready to proclaim his wonderful light.

Now, I get it. There are times when we want to belong to a group that's easier and that confirms all our values and habits and social norms. It's tempting to want this from the church. But a homogenous group is *not* church. You know what it is? It's a country club. And let me tell you that the group we have here today is *way* more interesting than a country club. This group is part of a culture which has always required its members to transcend human barriers. It's a group that invites us to see past male and female, child and adult, gay and straight. It's a group that communicates across social class and cultural divides. It's a group that requires us to break bread and drink wine and live in love and peace with whoever turns up to the table, no matter who they are, no matter where they come from. We may not always understand each other. We may not always communicate with each other. Heck, we may not always like each other. But in responding to God's generous mercy, and in joining together here around the table, we are committed to living in love from this day forth.

When we come together each week, when we share bread and wine around the table, and snacks after the service, when we share our stories, when we listen to each other and encourage one another, we are already doing something strange, countercultural, priestly, and wonderful. We are already communicating across boundaries and loving across human divides. And it doesn't stop here. We do this work here because it's our calling, and church is a great place to practice – but then we take it home. It seems like failure to love across boundaries is all the rage these days. But *our* calling is to live differently, both here at church and in every part of our lives. We are a motley crew! But in witnessing to God's mercy and love, we become the people of God together. And the more we practice, both here and at home, and the more we love and listen and learn from each other across every boundary that the world throws up between us, then the more we will grow into this identity as God's own people – and who knows where this will lead?

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE -

O Lord, our Rock,
we stand upon you alone,
and upon no other.
Build our faith into a house
made of living stones.
We offer these prayers of compassion
for our families and friends.
Teach us anew
that the foundation of life
is love for you and for neighbor.
We pray for the community
in which we live and work and learn.
Offer us, O God,
at least one clear opportunity
to be of service to someone in need.
Hear our prayers for those who are ill
and who struggle to recover health and wholeness.
Let there be peace on earth,
and let it begin with us, today.
In Christ the solid rock we pray. Amen.