

June 3, 2018 • Holy Communion • 2nd Sunday in Kingdomtide

“Faith That Tells Us Who We Are”

Homily by Rev. Larry Young

1 Peter 2:9-10

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.



Back in 2009, the British Humanist Association placed an ad on London buses that read: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Today there are no lack of voices arguing the British Humanist creed. They tell us that the whole concept of God is irrelevant in today’s world—so don’t let yourself be distracted by it, and get on with making the best of your life on your own. And there are a lot of people out there who go along with that. Now of course as a pastor I’ve spent most of my life surrounded by people for whom God and faith are simply givens. But in my retirement years as I’ve lived with more exposure to the secular world, I’ve found that religious faith is often not a prevailing viewpoint. In the South Bay where I live, I’ve been part of study/discussion groups alongside many engineer types now retired from our local space industry. Awhile back I took a class on cosmology with many of these types; and I got the distinct feeling that belief in God was heresy to their scientific understanding of the universe. My presentation in the class was on “The theology of cosmology,” and I think they didn’t know what to do with that topic! You may well have had your own experiences of people for whom this living without religious faith was the case. And yet often such people live good moral lives and seem to find a reasonable measure of happiness and satisfaction.

So what are these people missing? And what is it we gain, or we should be gaining, from our faith in the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ? For me the basic answer is that faith tells us who we are. It gives us an identity that informs the whole of our lives. And it does this in three ways. Faith tells us why we have been given life in this universe. It tells us that our lives are meant to have meaning and purpose. And it points to how we are meant to live so that we and others may find blessing.

You see, without this kind of faith a lot of people don’t have ways of anchoring their lives. Why are they here? Who knows—just a quirk of evolution? And what are they here for? Just to enjoy life as best they can figure that out? It’s no wonder a life of materialism and consumerism is the path so many choose, and morality is so loosely defined. There’s no vision of a more meaningful way to live.

So how much it matters that we who count ourselves as people of faith claim the identity and meaning that is our heritage. The letter of 1 Peter says it straight out: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” God out of love has given us life. And in Jesus Christ we learn that meaning and purpose are our birthright. And this points us to a way of living that brings blessing to us and to our world. And this sense of identity is meant to make all the difference! To be sure it’s an identity intended for all people—but we have to claim our status as God’s beloved if our chosenness is to mean anything.

Now I want to elaborate very briefly on these three facets of our Christian identity. First, what does it mean to know that we are children of a loving God? For contrast, hear these words written by Jacques Monod, a non-believing scientist: “(Man) must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes.” In other words he is saying that we humans are born into a hostile world that cares nothing about us. We’re totally isolated and alone—and we can only hope for good luck in making a life for ourselves. What a contrast to our Christian faith that a loving God has given us life and cares deeply about us. As Ron Theile put it in his message last Sunday, in God we have a spiritual home where we know we are loved and valued. The hairs of our head are numbered, and we are assured that nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love revealed to us in Jesus. Now to be sure that doesn’t mean that life will be a bed of roses for us; the thorns will be there too. I’m sure every one of us is aware of some thorns in our lives that we wish were not there; and we may be tempted to think we could improve on God’s design in some ways. But thankfully we’re not God, or we could really mess things up. As Paul put it in this letter to the Romans, faith assures us that all things work together for good for those who live in the love of God. So faith tells us we belong in this universe; we are surrounded by the love of our Creator; and our lives are meant to matter.

And that leads us to the second facet of our faith identity: as children of a loving God, our lives are meant to have meaning and purpose. How we live is meant to matter—first to us, but then inevitably to others whom we

relate to. Again, let's consider what life might look like without this belief. Living for oneself would be the name of the game. There would be no point to doing anything for others if it brought you no benefit. Why we are here would be a meaningless question. Growing a spiritual life would have no point. Believing your life would make any difference in human affairs would be futile. Morality would have no foundation. All that would matter would be making the most of your days for yourself, in a dog-eat-dog world. Again I think we can well ask whether the rampant materialism and consumerism of our time may be a sign of such living without a larger sense of purpose on the part of many.

When we allow faith to tell us who we are, we come out in a much different place. How we live and what we make of our lives is what matters most. The goodness we find for ourselves cannot be separated from what we contribute to others. God has made us spiritual beings destined to find and create meaning. Our world is meant to be different in some way because we have lived.

In the National Memorial Day special on PBS last Sunday, a Vietnam vet who had been struggling with post-traumatic stress for 30 years made the statement that the two most important days in our lives are the day we were born—and the day we realized why we were born. For him that second day was the day he found the meaning that eased his stress and gave new purpose to his life as a recovering vet. For us the day we realize why we were born will be one of our most important—and it likely won't be just one but many days—perhaps a whole lifetime. And it's a task each of us has to do for ourselves as we live in relationship with God. But it's hard to think of anything in life that matters more.

And what guidelines do we have for living this life of meaning and purpose? That of course is what Jesus came to bring us. His teachings and how he lived give us the blueprint for living as God means life to be lived. It is a way of life that cares about moral values, integrity, justice and compassion. It teaches us that what we do for others is just as important as looking after our own needs. And 1 Peter declares that we are a "royal priesthood," those who bear witness to this faith and this way of living, to those around us. This is the kind of life that gives us meaning and direction, and that blesses others along with ourselves.

Incorporating the Jesus way into our living is a lifetime venture. It's why we come here week after week for worship; it's why we study and pray both together and on our own; it's why we reach for mutual support with one another; it's why we express our faith in service ventures. And it's why we gather this morning for the sacrament of Communion. Communion celebrates Christ's giving of himself for our strengthening and nourishment in living the way he came to show us. It reminds us of God's love for us revealed in Christ, and tells us our lives are meant to matter. In short it reminds us of who we are as God's people in the world and all the meaning that comes with that. And so we come thankfully to Christ's table that we may be more the people God has called us to be. Amen.