

The Church and its Chosen Marks

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[0 : 00] Father, we give you thanks for pouring out your grace into our life. Receive this offering now, and we ask that you would continue to give an increase of your grace, that we could meekly hear your word to us, that we would receive you with affections purified, and we would bear forth the fruit of your spirit.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. Amen. Please be seated. Well, I want to echo what James said and really wish you a very happy Thanksgiving and hope that it is a time of great joy in being in relationship with family and friends today and tomorrow.

It's a holiday that I love. It's one of my favorite times of the year. It's a great holiday because it gathers people together.

We had our Thanksgiving dinner on Friday night. Odd time to do it, but it was when my mom and stepdad from the island, my cousin and her husband and little child from Victoria, a nephew, Catherine's nephew from Ontario, all of us gathered together.

And there's no way, in fact, some of us didn't know each other, that we would be together except for the fact that it was Thanksgiving. It's what really gathered us together.

[1 : 26] And it was a joyous time in that meal together. And I think it's very appropriate that we're doing this series on the church over Thanksgiving because the good news of God in Jesus gathers people.

That's what it is about. It is a powerful, powerful working of God that brings people together. Often people who would not normally be together, would not normally be in relationships with each other or even know each other.

Even in the most individualistic culture, and I think Vancouver would be at the top of that list, God gathers people together when they come to believe in Jesus and obey him.

And he doesn't just gather people. He actually creates a community that's radically different from the society around it in order to really bless the society that is around us.

That's what God is doing. Very simply, that's what the church is about. That's the mark of the church. It's the people that God gathers so that they will bless the world.

[2 : 37] And I want to look at this because it's so foundational to what we are about. Peter has three images of the church that I want to look at in this reading that we had.

And if you look at page 1014, you can follow along with what I'm doing. And I want to try to keep it as straightforward as possible. But at the bottom of page 1014, you look at chapter 2, 1 through 12. And there's three images. He talks about a family. He uses family terms, that the church is a family that's really gripped by grace. And then he uses the term of a temple, these stones being built into a temple.

He calls the church a temple. And then he says that it is a people. It's like a special called people that have a purpose.

They're mission-minded. And so they're chosen people on a mission. And I want to talk about those three images over the next few minutes that we have together. This family, it says, Peter's very clear that God's grace has come into people's lives.

[3 : 50] So back in chapter 1, he says that the grace of God leads to a transformed life. And the heart of it all is that Jesus frees people.

He ransoms them from a futile way of life. And he gives them a new spiritual life. That's what this letter has been about so far. And a very important aspect of this life is that God gives people a new love for others who experience new life as they enter a new family.

So if you look up at verse 22 and 23 in chapter 1, just look up a paragraph there. He says, And that intentional and earnest love is essential because like any family, you see faults in one another the

longer that you are together.

The longer that time passes, you see more and more faults. And so if you look at verse 1 in chapter 2, it says, Put away all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander.

Well, Peter says that because that was happening in the churches that he was writing to. It doesn't sound like a very pleasant family to be part of. It is real life.

[5 : 16] People see one another's sins. And, you know, it's saying that this is something that can cause turnover in churches. It can cause people to leave churches because they are experiencing sin.

They are experiencing things that cause the tearing down instead of building up. And the real example that Peter gives from sin inside of us, you know, it comes out of an unforgiveness or an anger or resentment or an insecurity or a fear that has come from something.

And it causes us to harm other people in our Christian community. Well, Peter says instead of this, the family needs to know the kindness of God and act on it.

Look at verse 2. Peter uses another family term besides brotherly love. He says, like new babies long for pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Now, that's a marvelous verse. It is saying that this family is a family of grace. Jesus is good. You have all tasted the kindness of God adopting you into his family by the forgiveness of your sin.

[6 : 37] And you taste that grace as you read this pure word of God that's not watered down. You taste the grace of God as you hear the living truth in the Bible.

And Peter is saying here to crave for that kindness to change your life and your relationships in the church deeply day by day. Just as a baby longs for milk.

And we had a baby in our house on Friday night and he was wanting to eat. And you could really hear that he was longing for milk. But it was something that all of his being was wanting at that moment.

And it's saying here, you know, like that, long for the taste of God's grace in every aspect of your life. And take steps, real practical steps to grow into that salvation.

And that's why at St. John's we're working very hard to provide ways to help you with this, with this growth that we're all called to in discipleship programs. We have them for all of our ages and everyone that's in this church.

[7 : 42] If you're not growing, it's because you're not obeying. You're not tasting the goodness of Jesus. But what an incredible blessing it is when this family reflects that goodness to each other.

There is a deep unity. There's this oneness that Jesus says is the way that the world will know that God the Father sent Jesus and has loved us.

And I know that you have experienced that grace in your relationships. You've also probably experienced the other things, the tearing down as well.

But when you experience that grace of God in your relationships with one another, people who are reflecting the goodness that they have experienced in Christ, there is something otherworldly about that.

It's something that the world cannot offer. It is a massive gift, that deep unity. Jesus says that's attractive to the world. The world will know that the Father sent me and that Jesus loves this church.

[8 : 49] So that's the first thing. It's a picture of the church as family that is growing. Now besides being a family, Peter says that we are also a temple.

And this is a strange thing in a way to be called. Verses 4 through 8 talks a lot about stones. I think there's about 8 times that you hear the word stone mentioned. And it starts out, if you look at verses 4 and 5, by saying, As you come to him, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Well, what is this about? We're called stones. Well, what it means here is that in Jesus, when we come to Jesus, we're coming to a living stone.

And we are described in that way as well as living stones. And it's a word that's not about stones that, you know, you might find scattered on the ground, that you might throw. So, it means that they are actually large boulders that are placed because they have a certain task in a building.

And Peter's thinking of a temple in Jerusalem here. Our family went down a couple of weeks ago to the Science Center in Seattle. And while we were there, we saw one of these IMAX movies of

Jerusalem.

[10:24] It was a movie about Jerusalem. And it was a great film because one of the things it did is it really showed what the temple would have looked like. And, of course, it showed present-day shots of the Wailing Wall, which is the western retaining wall of the temple.

And those stones are massive. They are between two tons and 100 tons. Some of them are even 400 tons.

And they have been shaped meticulously by chiseling and chipping so that they fit together in a certain way with very, very accurate measurements.

It took a long time, especially with the foundation stones, to get it exactly right because the lines of the temple went out from these massive stones.

The precision of how this was done and placed 2,000 years ago is astounding. And it mystifies archaeologists as to how it was done.

[11:29] Now, Peter says that God is shaping you and he's shaping me to be like Jesus, the living stone. He is chiseling us.

He is forming us in that way to fit together. And the keystone is Jesus. There's two very different views of Jesus in the world that is described here.

He is one who is rejected by people and killed on a cross. But in God's sight, he is chosen. He is precious. And that's the only true viewpoint.

Because God uses the rejection of Jesus to bring life to the world. He destroys the power of sin and death on the cross. And God raised him from the dead.

He made him Lord and judge of all. So that his goodness overcomes all evil. And he will come again. Well, in God's sight, you are very closely identified with this Jesus.

[12:28] You are chosen and precious. And he is building you and me together to be a spiritual house that conforms to that cornerstone, which is Jesus.

In other words, he is making us into a temple where God lives now. And it is not something that can be confined to a certain physical place.

And the thing that's crucial about this picture of the stones in the temple is that the Christian life must be about the gathering of Christians.

You cannot build, you cannot be built on your own. God will only build you in relationship to other stones. In your relationship to the cornerstone, Jesus, but also in relationship to the other living stones.

So that you and I are meant to fit into one another's lives so that we become like the living stone, Jesus. And that's what God is doing. He creates our gathering.

[13:34] He lives in our life together to make this building into something that he has decided. Into Jesus, the image of Jesus, his son.

Well, what does our life together look like? Well, if you look at verse 5, it says you're being built to be a holy priesthood and to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So in a word, our life together is meant to look like worship. It is worship. And that doesn't mean we are in a temple killing animals.

The thing that happens with Jesus is that your life and my life are meant to be that living sacrifice. And so from Romans 12, we hear that spiritual worship is presenting our bodies to be a living sacrifice.

That's what living stones do. It's very down to earth. Wherever your body is, that is where you are meant to worship. It has to do with real life in the body.

[14:43] And an example of that is putting away all malice and hypocrisy and deceit in our relationships at church, which we just heard at the beginning of our passage.

And if you jump down at the bottom of our passage to verse 12, worship means keeping your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they will see your good deeds and glorify God.

That's what worship is. It is those good deeds because God is shaping you into the image of the living stone that is Jesus. And that's why it's crucial to know that verse 7, that Jesus is the cornerstone.

You know that the angles of the walls of the building and the level of the stones throughout are extended from that one stone, and that God has given him the key role in that world.

He is the one to build our life together on because the lines of that building will be true so that our life together will be a life of worship. He's the one true foundation that will never let you down, he says.

[15 : 50] You will never be put to shame. And I think that's because that's the life of worship is the life that will shine when Jesus comes again. That will be the life of heaven.

These are the things that will continue on after our death and go into eternity. And then that leads us finally to the fact that you are a people.

The church is called a people on a mission. And I want you to look at verse 9 because this is the key verse for the action of these pictures of the church.

And it doesn't look like action at first. It says that you are a chosen race. You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's very own, people who belong to him.

And verse 9 is a wonderful verse because we are his own possession as well. It's an amazing description. And you think, well, when I look around this gathering, that sounds like kind of exalted language.

[16 : 57] What is this about? And it comes from Exodus 19, from that passage that we heard read first today. And it was a description of the Hebrew people being singled out for God for a purpose.

He says this. He says, Now, Peter is saying that because of Jesus, our very existence, our identity comes from the fact that we belong to God.

And it's a marvelous term because a treasured possession in ancient times was the one thing that the king treasured above every other thing. It was a thing that belonged exclusively to him.

And it's an amazing thing to talk about our gathering at 9 a.m. We are part of this bigger gathering that God has set his love onto and he has held up as being most precious.

We might look at each other and say, probably in ourselves and say, Why would God treasure me? Why would he do that? Well, the clue to that is from the Old Testament as well.

[18 : 21] Because God says to, or Moses says to the Hebrew people, It's not because you were a huge, big gathering of people.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you. For you were the fewest of all peoples. But it's because the Lord loves you and is keeping his promises to you.

You see, what he's saying is that Israel was not a choice nation. It was a chosen nation. And that's the word for us as well.

God has brought you into his family simply because he loves you. It is not because we are better than other peoples. It is because he has set his love upon you.

And there's a deep love, there's a bond of love that happens between people in this gathering when we are loved in this way. When we're born again, we enter into a new family, a very large one.

[19 : 21] It transcends all ages and cultures and status and language and race. It's one of the reasons that our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Malawi is important because there is a world wide-ness about this.

This is what the word Catholic means in the creed. And the congregation here at St. John's is the little part of this family that we see regularly. And we are thankful, especially on this Thanksgiving day, that God has placed his love on us.

That he has called us his treasured possession. And there's a purpose for him doing that. We are a treasured possession that have a mission.

We are called holy, set apart. There's a calling to live a life that looks different to the world. It's a calling to live a life that's faithful to Jesus because he is your foundation.

It's a calling to have relationships in the church that are different, that have a quality and a depth to them because of his love placed on us.

[20 : 26] That makes it a community of contrasts. Something that is attractive to the world. And that mission goes further. It says that we are called a royal priesthood.

And that term just means that you are a priesthood that belongs to God. And priests were people who could come close to God. They could be in his presence.

And they could help other people come into the presence of God as well. Well, because Jesus has offered the one perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, each of us comes into God's presence directly through Jesus.

And each of us can help others to have a right relationship with God by telling them and reminding them of the gospel of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Well, here is where we are meant to be active. And this is the purpose for our new identity that we have. It's the mission statement for every Christian church. It's in verse 9 again.

[21 : 26] We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Why? That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Now, I should end the sermon right here because that's it. That's what you're called to do. That's the application. Because all of us, and I am going to end in just a minute.

All of us, all of us, we're in a place of spiritual darkness. Every one of us. Where God was hidden from us. But God has called you and me out of this darkness by his living word.

That's the thing that all of us have in common. And that happened to me as a little child. I grew up having the light of God shown to me by my parents.

But it was a movement of God calling me through them into his marvelous light. And this is an excellent thing. And this is an excellent thing. It is an excellent thing to have God do this in your life for you.

[22 : 38] It is an excellent thing that you experience the living God as his child. As a person who has been adopted by grace. Who has been brought into the family of God.

Where you will be forever, by the way. And we are called to be clear about those excellencies. To grow into them. To know them. So that you can proclaim them to the world.

Proclaim them to one another here in this gathering. So that we can tell the world about it. Make known to those outside the church. What is happening inside as well.

This is a heartfelt and joyous thing to share with the world. You know it comes because of the fact that Jesus has freed us into this community of grace.

That's what we have to share. The most joyous thing in the world. And we're not just calling people. We're not just proclaiming to people that you can know Jesus. Which is the most important thing.

[23 : 44] It is saying that you can know the people. The others that Jesus has brought from darkness into light. That's where our relationships are so critical.

We are God's own people. People who had not received mercy. But now we know mercy. People who didn't know the forgiveness and love of God. But we know it now. People who were not the people of God.

But now we are his treasured possession. What do we do about that? Well our mission is to call people. To pray for them.

To bring them into that fellowship of believers. So that they will know the blessings of being brought out of darkness. Into his marvelous light. So may we grow into that.

As we crave spiritual milk. May we grow into this fact that we are the family of grace. That we are a temple. That lives a life of worship.

[24 : 41] That we are people who are on a mission. To be priests to the world. You know people who are close to God. Who are bringing them into fellowship with him. And fellowship with our fellow believers.

Who have been brought from darkness. Into his marvelous marvelous light. May we bless this world with this reality. As we give thanks to God. For his church.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.