

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
May 14, 2017  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Auburn, NY  
Rev. Steven W. Plank

“Baptismal Realities”

Text: 1 Peter 2:9 – “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...”

Scripture Lessons: Acts 7:55-60  
1 Peter 2:2-10

Proposition: In baptism, we acknowledge and celebrate that we are claimed as God’s own people. That’s all nice and good, but what does that have to do with so-called “real life?” Peter writes about the new realities in which we live as the people of God, and these are “Baptismal Realities” that help shape and form our identity to be more and more like Christ.

Prayer for Illumination: God our helper, by your Holy Spirit, open our minds, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may be led into your truth and taught your will, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It was just about four years ago now that I began having phone and Skype conversations with some wonderful people in Central New York about this new, unique position called a Stated Clerk/Communicator for the Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse. I confess that never in our wildest imaginations did my wife, Caroline, or I ever envision that we’d be living in New York State...nor did we imagine how much we’d fall in love with the area, with the people, with our home and our neighborhood in Syracuse.

Fast forward a couple of months later, and I was sitting in a room with five people, talking much more seriously as we were trying to discern if God was calling us to journey together for a few years. After the usual introductions, the

very first “interview” question that I was asked was, “So, do you like snow?” When I replied that both Caroline and I genuinely enjoyed winter, it seemed that everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and we rolled up our proverbial sleeves to spend the next two days together. One of the more interesting questions that the Search Committee asked me was this: “If God and us were to call you to this position, what would you miss about being the pastor of a congregation?” Without batting an eye, I said, “Well, let me tell you what I *wouldn't* miss. I wouldn't miss boilers and roofs!” After everyone chuckled, I said, “I'm sure I'd have opportunities to preach and lead worship, which is something I enjoy immensely. I'm sure I'd have opportunities to celebrate the Sacrament of Communion in churches around the Presbytery. But, strange as perhaps it might sound, I'd miss doing funeral services. There is something innately holy and sacred about being with a family during grief.” Sadly, although I didn't think I'd ever officiate at a funeral or graveside service again, I did so just two weeks ago today with Patrick and Jenna and their families as we buried Ezra and Leo... and it was heartbreaking and tragic, yet it was truly a sacred and holy time. I continued with the committee, “I'd also miss baptisms. Celebrating a baptism, whether of an infant or a teenager or an adult, is something so incredibly special as one is recognized and received as a part of a particular community of faith within the embrace of God's love and grace.” Baptism is about celebrating a life. It's about the promise of newness. It's about being claimed and loved by the Creator of the Universe. It's about taking on a new identity... no longer living just for ourselves, but about living into new “Baptismal Realities” as followers of Jesus.

In our second lesson this morning, St. Peter uses some amazing words to describe how we live into those “Baptismal Realities,” to give us some images to help us glimpse who we are to be as a part of the community of faith, the Church.

Some of those words have been misunderstood and misused by people through the centuries. Some of them have negative connotations for us Protestants. Some of them have been used to exclude other people from blessings that we enjoy. Others have implications that seem old, archaic, and anachronistic. But I think they are words that can help teach, inform, and shape who we are as the people of God. Let's take a look at these descriptive words.

Peter writes that we are a “chosen race.” It doesn't take but a nanosecond, does it, to think of ways that *this* phrase has been misused, and horribly so? More atrocities have been committed by people who were convinced that they were the “chosen race,” as opposed to people who were different than them. Much of our Civil War – a phrase that in itself has to be one of the greatest oxymorons of all time! – was fought about this issue. Alas, much of what we saw during the last campaign season brutally reminded us of racism that simmers barely below the surface of our society, and it can be manifest in the blink of an eye. And, of course, our country is not alone in this. Hitler was maniacal on this issue. The white South Africans built their societal system of apartheid on a misinterpretation of what it means to be a “chosen race” of people. History is full of instances where this phrase has been misused. But what did St. Peter mean when he wrote this? The word “chosen” literally means those who are “called out,” who are elected (a good Presbyterian word if ever there was one!) by God to live in special ways: ways of service, compassion, and witness. And the word “race” refers to people who are related, who are inseparably linked with one another, who are family together. Lest we naively think that racism as we know it was not on Peter's radar, remember that he was writing in the very midst of one of the hardest battles the early Church fought: a racial and ethnic battle between Jews and Gentiles who were believers in Jesus. The first deacons were established to make sure that

Gentile believers who were widows received an equitable amount of food as did the Jewish believers we were widows. Peter asserts that we *all* are family, chosen by God, called to be together by God, and called for special purposes of grace and love in the world. We are a “chosen race.”

He wrote that we are a “royal priesthood.” That grates on our Protestant, American ears, doesn’t it? We fought a Revolutionary War to throw off what we experienced as the injustices of a royal monarch. During the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we Protestants got rid of anything that even hinted about “priesthood.” We proudly have crowed about “the priesthood of *all* believers,” sometimes defiantly crying that we have no need for an intermediary between us and God, except as that role is filled by Christ. And the Reformers were absolutely correct and biblical when they affirmed that we all can have direct, immediate, intimate access to God our creator and parent. However, that does not mean that we don’t need others to help us along the way, does it? I remember years ago visiting a monastery with other Protestant ministers, and we were talking with the abbot one day about monastic life. One of the more brazen of my colleagues asked the abbot how the monks could justify their existence confined within the monastery rather than being involved in more direct service and witness out in the world. The abbot thought for a moment, and then, with more compassion than I might have mustered in that circumstance, said, “My guess is that you don’t always have the time to pray as often as you’d like, as often as you need.” My colleague agreed. “Well,” the abbot continued, “while you are working out in your busy world, we are here praying for you when you don’t have time to pray yourself.” You’ve done things and said things like that, just as others have said supportive and helpful and healing words to you. When we do that for one another, we are

fulfilling a biblical understanding of a priestly role for each other. We are a “royal priesthood.”

St. Peter writes to tell us in the Church that we are a “holy nation.” This is as current a controversial topic around the world as there can be. Just look at the manipulative fear-mongering about “immigrants” coming into “our” nation... as if we weren’t in the place of being immigrants ourselves, at one time or another! And as the world’s resources become stretched thinner and thinner, and as our interrelated economies become more and more stressed, we’ve seen many in our country and our government who want to draw strict, tight borders around ourselves. But that is most definitely *not* what St. Peter meant when he wrote those ancient words. The word he used for “nation” here is a word that refers not just to a national grouping of people, but to any group of folks who are living together or who are associated closely together. For St. Peter, that is *exactly* what the Church is called to be – a group of people who realize that our faith in Jesus Christ links us together in ways that transcend national or ethnic identifications. And our community of faith – the Church – is “holy,” Peter tells us, because it is *God* who has called us together, who has linked us with each other, who has inseparably linked us with Christ. We are a “holy nation.”

Finally, St. Peter writes that we are “God’s own people.” That to which the Apostle was referring was that we are a people who are not our own... who belong to God... who have been created by God, called by God, claimed by God, loved by God. That’s precisely what we remember when we celebrate a baptism... or when we remember that *we* are baptized! Our identity with God transcends all our other identities. We are “God’s own people.”

A few years ago, I attended a two-day seminar about preparing for retirement. It was a fascinating, and not a little intimidating, seminar! One of the most interesting things about it was an exercise the seminar leader had us think about. He invited us to write a three or four sentence paragraph about how we would introduce ourselves to a group of people we hadn't met before. But of course, he challenged us to imagine doing that *after* we were retired, and said that the only restriction we had was that we couldn't say, "I used to be a ...". It was a challenge for most of us there, and it is a challenge for so many of us who think that our identity is wrapped up in what we *do* rather than who we are. In the midst of all other ways in which we might think of ourselves, St. Peter gave us some new terms to consider about who we really are. *You* are a chosen race. *You* are a royal priesthood. *You* are a holy nation. *You* are God's own people. Remind yourself of these realities each and every time you witness a Baptism, each and every time you see a font. For these new realities about which St. Peter wrote are your "Baptismal Realities." They are symbolized in the act of your baptism, renewed each time you witness someone else's baptism, and reinforced when you remember that *you* are baptized. These "Baptismal Realities" are the "real world" in which you are invited and called by God to live... to live each time you exit this church and go back into that other "real world" where you spend so much of your time. Just remember to take this "real world" here with you when you go into that one. For they are part of the same world... and that world, like you, belongs to God.

**AMEN!**