

Sermon 11-15-09¹
Psalm 16
1 Peter 2:4-10
The Living Stone

For the last couple of months, I've been challenging the session of our church to wrestle with two questions. First, I've been asking them to consider who God is calling us to be as a congregation of God's own making within this community? Second, I've put before them this highly provocative question: if the church doors were to close tomorrow would anyone in the community (excluding our membership and friends) know we were gone? Now some of you may be shocked or angered that I would even raise such a question, nevertheless it is a question we need to be honest about.

You see, the scary part about this question is it forces us to think about who we are as a congregation; it forces us to consider what Jesus is doing out of the freedom of his love and power both within this church and within this community, and this question compels us to wrestle with what it means to be the church today – here and now. There was an old way of thinking that assumed had some sort of faith-background, so you could stick a church in the middle of any community, offer worship and a few educational programs, and people would flock to that church. There was no need to do much outreach; rather people would wander in on their own. Yet, what we're learning now is that this way of thinking no longer works. When I first met Dave Helfin, one of the council members here in Emsworth, his first comment was, "I didn't even know there was a Presbyterian Church in Emsworth." Friends, the challenge we are facing as a congregation is that after 140 years we've become so comfortable with where we are that we've forgotten who we're called to be as a

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congregation divinely called and empowered by the Lord our God through Jesus Christ our Savior in the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot let ourselves off the hook anymore.

There is a wonderful scene in the movie, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* that highlights the need to remember who we are called to be. In the movie, Matt Damon plays a golf pro in Savannah, Georgia who goes to fight in WW1. After a devastating mission, he doesn't return to Savannah until 15 years later. After being offered the chance to play golf again, Damon's character refuses to be involved in something so frivolous as golf. Yet, he digs out his old clubs and begins hitting some balls, shanking them to the left and the right. He can't play like the pro he once was. While he continues smacking the balls around, Bagger Vance, a mysterious caddy, walks onto the scene. "You lost your swing," Bagger suggests, "we got to go find it." And as the rest of the movie unfolds, Damon's character seeks to find what lies right before his eyes; remembering who he is called to be. Our lives as Christians are very similar to this.

In a lot of ways, it's easy to "lose our swing" in the Christian life. On the one side, between magazine covers, targeted advertisements, and commercials, we're apt to think that all we are in life, all that makes us human, is the reality that we are consumers; that our task is to shop, spend, eat, and sleep. On the other side, we can become so comfortable with the way things are or so entrenched in our comfort zones, that we forget who we are; suffering an identity crises as we head into retreat mode whenever something challenges what we perceive to be the status quo. Yet neither of these ways of thinking describes the very dynamic and active character of the Christian life; a life signified by our union with Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior and the call and claim he has placed upon us. When we

“lose our swing” as Christians and as a community of faith, a great place to return to is Peter’s first letter.

The Apostle Peter is writing to a church that has struggled with finding her way in the world. Scattered throughout the Roman Empire, he writes to a church struggling to maintain her primary identity as those who live their lives in Christ. In Jesus we have new life, a new way of living that opens us up for participation in God’s mission and ministry within the world. Because of this reality of God’s own making, Peter basically commends to us, “Come to the living Stone, the source of life. The workmen took one look at it and threw it out; God set it in the place of honor. Present yourselves as living stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you’ll serve as holy priests offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ.”² In calling Christians a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices he is reminding us about the reality that we are called to live and act a certain way within the world. Gone are the days of animal sacrifices and grain offerings, Peter reminds us that we give of ourselves and dedicate our lives wholly to God; consecrated, set apart to participate in Jesus’ mission and ministry to the world. But Peter doesn’t leave it at that.

In one of the most famous passages of scripture, Peter reminds each one of us who we are as those who live their lives in Christ: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, so that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Here we discover the ultimate reminder of who we are called to be in Christ Jesus our Lord. No one who is baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is exempt from this designation.

² Paraphrased from Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

Contrary to what the world might think about us as well as what we often assume about ourselves, Peter emphasizes that this is who we are; this is who God has consecrated us to be. Through our union with Christ by the power of the Spirit we are elevated to this identity of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; in Christ we find our home in his grace and salvation. But I'll bet almost none of us think of ourselves in this way. If I were a gambling man, I would go so far as to say that we are prone to settling for far less than what is promised to us. It's hard for us to remember who we really are and whose we really are because we can't even begin to conceive that the Lord our God would graciously extend to us, even us, such an irresistible invitation in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; that he would call us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own people.

We come to Jesus, the living stone, reminded of our true identity as those who find their lives wrapped up within his life "Once you were not a people" proclaims Peter, "but now you are God's people." For in Christ we are not put to shame despite what the world might think of us. Resting our lives upon Jesus the cornerstone means that our lives have meaning and they are shaped by the one to whom we are joined by the power of the Holy Spirit. Resting our lives on Jesus the cornerstone we're reminded of who we are, that there is nothing that can tear us down, nothing that can thwart God's will, nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Sometimes we forget who we are, we forget who God calls us to be as a church within the community of Emsworth—sometimes we need to be reminded that you and I are more than we think we are and that God in, through, and as Jesus Christ is up to something within this community that he himself has placed us within.

I continue to ask the provocative question, “if our doors closed tomorrow would anyone miss us,” not because I want you to be depressed or guilty or feel angry; rather I ask the question so that we might remember who we are. We are God’s people here in Emsworth, called as a holy priesthood to offer up the spiritual sacrifices of our lives for the glory of God. Because of who we are in Christ, here and now, we’re called to join in on Jesus’ mission and ministry; to be concerned with the things he is concerned with and to join in on the work that he is already doing. Through our lives we’re called to proclaim the mighty acts of God; to proclaim all that God has done for us in, through, and as Jesus through our words, through the giving of our time, our money, and our talents. There isn’t a lot of pine showing on a Sunday morning. No! We have a living reminder that God still has a purpose for us, as a royal priesthood God is still calling us to be in this community – not because we decided this but because God has ordained it.

Last week I closed by asking you what offering can you make—in light of who God calls us to be in Jesus Christ our Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit, I urge you again to think and to pray about the offering you can make. Because you are a holy priesthood in Christ, what offering can you make with your time? Because you are a chosen race in Christ, what offering can you make with your talents? Because you are a royal priesthood in Christ, what offering can you make with your money? Because we come to the living stone, Jesus our Lord, as a church of his own making, what offering can we make out of the depths of our lives? Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.