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LIKE BEING A MARINE

1 Peter 2:4-10

Well known University of Pennsylvania psychologist, Martin Seligman, did a classic study along with Steve Maier that involved German Shepherd dogs. They divided the dogs into three groups. All of them were fitted with harnesses. The first group was given mild electric shocks by the harness, but a lever was placed near them that the dog could push down and if it did, that would stop the shock. The second group had the same thing, except the lever did nothing. It would not stop the shock. The third group was the control group and they received no shocks at all. After they had tested the dogs they then put them in a box that had two sections separated by a low divider. The dogs would be put into the section in the box that would give them yet another mild shock. But if they hopped over the divider into the other side they would be safe from the shocks. The interesting result was that the control group dogs and the dogs in the group with a working lever figured out how to escape from the shocks by going to the other section. The dogs who had a lever that didn’t work did not go to the other section and escape the shocks. They had concluded from their experience with the lever that there was no escaping the unpleasant shocks. The researchers called their condition “learned helplessness.” They felt trapped with no hope.

It turns out that humans can experience learned helplessness. I experience that when I try to do anything mechanical. Years of history have ingrained in me the idea that it is hopeless. We can get to a place where we have an identity from which we think we cannot escape and that we cannot change. Our identity, who we think we are, determines what we will do and be in this world.

Who are you? What is your identity? I have always found it odd that from the first time Laurie and I went to Hawaii for our honeymoon 42 years ago we have encountered people who were there because they were trying to “find themselves,” trying to figure out who they were. Why do you suppose when people feel like they need to find themselves that they will locate their identity in Hawaii? What makes them think their “self” is apparently hiding there, waiting to be discovered? Why don’t people move to Yuma to find themselves?

Who you think you are, what you believe your identity is, can cripple you, trap you in a prison of learned helplessness, or it can free you, elevate you, inspire you. Today as we look at 1 Peter 2:4-10 we will get a glimpse of our true identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

WE ARE BUILT ON JESUS CHRIST

Peter focused in verses 4-8 on the image of Jesus being a stone. He refers to him as a living stone, the cornerstone and a stone of stumbling. Stones were a key building material in that day. They didn’t use concrete to build large buildings, they used stones. The point is that in the building of God’s work, Jesus is the crucial component. Peter calls him a living stone which is kind of an odd image. Stones are not alive. They don’t breathe, communicate, walk around. Laurie and I once encountered a person who seemed like a living rock. It was years ago in a sandwich shop. The girl behind the counter asked what we would like. We ordered a 12 inch sandwich. She pulled out a 6 inch long piece of bread to make the sandwich on. Before she could get started We stopped her and said, “No, we want to get a 12 inch sandwich.” This seemed to stump the girl. She paused and looked puzzled for a moment, then she began to cut the piece of bread in half, apparently to make us a 3 inch sandwich. We know she was living because she was moving and talking, but she appeared to be a living rock.

Peter wasn’t using living rock to mean something like that. Why would he use this imagery? It was because he wants to emphasize that this stone imagery is a metaphor. Jesus is very much alive and active in the world, but he is also the thing upon which God’s whole activity in this world, his temple, the place where people encounter him, is built.

I would paraphrase these verses by saying Jesus is the keystone. Peter says Jesus is the cornerstone. That was the stone that was the key to the whole building. Our lives, our identity, are not founded on doctrines or rules. They are not founded on an organization or tied to a physical building. They are founded on the person of Jesus Christ.

He is the linchpin, the key to all that we believe. Jesus’ life and work of teaching, dying for us and rising from the dead, guarantees us that God is real, that he loves us, that we are accepted by him, and that the hope of eternal life is very real. In his book, *Searching For God Knows What*, Donald Miller said he once delivered a lecture on the gospel to students at a Christian college. He began by telling them he was going to leave out one important element. He proceeded to describe the rampant sin plaguing our culture and all of the terrible effects of it. He said that sin separates us from God. He talked about the beauty of a moral life and how righteous living is better. At the end he asked them if they could identify what he had left out. He said, “Not a single hand raised. I presented the gospel to Christian Bible students and left out Jesus, and nobody noticed.”

In John 14:17 Jesus told his disciples about the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit. He said, “The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” Jesus claimed that after he ascended into heaven the spirit of the person who had been with those disciples would actually come and live inside them. This is remarkable. How could he do that? I have no idea. But Jesus said this will be the engine of the new life in him. We will have him living inside us somehow.

We tell people they need to ask Jesus into their hearts. It’s so trite that it almost loses meaning to us. But Jesus said he would actually live inside of us. Do you realize that if you have put your faith in him, Jesus is actually in you? That feels hard to believe, doesn’t it? I don’t hear him talking to me, I don’t feel him in there, I’m not remarkable like he was, and it seems to me that if he was really in me I’d be better, more like him, more spiritual, more Christlike, more powerful. But then I think about what you and I are like. We believe this gospel based on writings that are now between 2000 and 3000 years old. In those writings are some pretty bizarre stories. Stories of a sea being parted, a man being swallowed by a big fish and surviving the experience, the story of a man walking on water and turning water into wine, stories of many people being healed dramatically of severe problems. The story of a man rising from the dead, never to die again. I’m not superstitious. I don’t really believe I bring bad luck to the Padres, that just my presence at one of the games in person somehow curses them so they are destined to lose. I don’t believe the stars exert power on my life, I don’t believe in ghosts, I don’t believe in psychics and I don’t think UFO’s have little green men in them. I believe we actually put men on the moon, and the corona virus and the subsequent vaccine are not some kind of conspiracy. I am, for the most part a pretty down to earth guy. Yet I believe all those stories in the Bible are true. I believe with all my heart that God visited our world in the form of Jesus Christ.

Why do I believe these things? Is it because my parents programmed me to and I’m not smart enough to question those things? Is it because I’m more gullible than most smart people? I have no doubt that my parents had a huge influence, but at the end of the day it is because Jesus is in me.

Peter says Jesus is also the stone of stumbling. That’s an image I understand, because there has been more than one occasion when I have tripped on a rock. Jesus is the rock that trips up a lot of people. Verse 7 quotes Psalm 118:22. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” He is the place where people are going to balk. Peter knew that the turning point in life for everyone comes when confronted by Jesus. What will you do with him? Many will stumble at that point. Oh, perhaps they can believe there is a God. All of Peter’s Jewish friends believed that. But then comes Jesus, claiming to be the way that we can know and be accepted by God. That is where people stumble. But we have believed in Jesus, just as Peter and his original audience had. What does that mean about us, and about our identity, our place in this world?

WE ARE A PRIESTHOOD

Peter uses a lot of imagery in these verses, but notice the idea that is repeated. It is at the heart of his message about who we are. In verse 5 he said that we are now a holy priesthood. Then in verse 9 he says we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood. This is now our identity. This is a crucial core of who we are and what we are to do in this world.

You might be thinking, “I’m no priest. I’m not that religious, and frankly, I don’t want to be.” I can understand that. I never wanted to be a pastor until I became one. I didn’t find pastors all that appealing for the most part. I remember an occasion years ago when our family was invited to lunch at the home of some friends after church. There were probably 12 people at the lunch, including the pastor of these people’s church. I watched how he interacted in that setting. He dominated the conversation. He came across to me as stuffy, full of himself and kind of phony. I had seen that before in pastors. Oh, you have to call them “Pastor Bob” or “Pastor John.” Why? I don’t call my neighbor who is a data scientist “Scientist Mark” or the guy across the street “Accountant Michael.” Oh, but if you’re a pastor people have to show you that respect, right? Ugh. I don’t want that, and you probably don’t either because it just doesn’t seem real.

But that’s not what Peter was referring to. Neither was he saying this has to become your occupation. You might think that you are an engineer, or a software developer, or a sales rep, or a banker, or a teacher, or a person who is retired from one of those careers. Those are the jobs you do, but they are not who you are. In Christ, you have a new destiny and identity that supersedes all of those roles. It doesn’t replace them. It doesn’t mean you quit whatever your job is and go into the full time priest business. It means you are a priest even as you do your job. You might think of it a bit like being a Marine.

Michael, our son in law, was a Marine for almost 13 years. One of the core tenets of the Marines is that you are a Marine first, then whatever job you do second. So Michael was first given infantry training by the Marines. As an officer he was trained to lead a rifle platoon before anything else. Then they trained him to be a fighter pilot. That took years and costs around $5 million. But if you’re in the Marines, you’re a Marine first and a fighter pilot second.

I was surprised when Michael told us after he returned from a deployment to Japan that he was likely going to be assigned to a job on the ground for a good part of a year. The Marines expect pilots to fill some role on the ground for one tour because they are Marines first and pilots second. I am amazed that they spent millions of dollars to train pilots, then take them out of the cockpit for a year. But they are stressing that you’re a Marine, and that’s more important than being a pilot. So Michael spent a year training for, then carrying out his role on the ground in Afghanistan. You could be a truck driver, a security officer, a logistics specialist, a clerk, a cook, a pilot, an intelligence officer, but you are a Marine first and always. That’s kind of like being a priest. You might be a butcher, baker or a candlestick maker, but you are a priest first and always. Just as you might be a Marine who is driving a truck, flying a plane, cooking meals, so you are a priest who is cutting meat, baking or making candlesticks.

There are some significant things Peter tells us about being a part of this priesthood. For one, you are chosen. To be chosen is an honor. As you will see, it means you represent God to the world. You are his envoy. In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul says we are Christ’s ambassadors. Not just anybody gets to do that. Being an ancient priest wasn’t a volunteer position. You had to be chosen for it.

In her book, *Don’t Stop Laughing Now*, Sheila Walsh related a story about something that happened when she was single and dating a guy name Barry. They were going to have dinner at one of their favorite restaurants, but when he showed up he did not look well. She told him they didn’t have to go out, she could cook something, but he insisted he was fine. As they drove, he seemed to get worse. She felt his forehead and he seemed hot. She said she thought he might have the flu. He insisted he was fine, but he looked like he was going to throw up. At the restaurant he just seemed to get worse. Then it hit her. “What if he wants to break up with me.” She decided if that was it, she was going to order the most expensive thing she could find on the menu. The waiter handed them menus. She put hers down, thinking they needed to talk. He barked, “Aren’t you going to order?” She said, “Man, you’re cranky tonight.” She picked up the menu, but was confused by it. She couldn’t find the list of items. Then she realized what she was looking at. Inside the folder was just one sheet of paper with the words, “I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me” written on it. When she looked up she saw a video camera. She heard a voice behind her say, “Well aren’t you going to answer him?” It was her best friend, Marlene. She looked around and saw that the restaurant was full of friends of theirs. She looked at Barry and he was now on one knee, holding out a beautiful ring to her. She said yes. Later she said, “What would you have done if I had said no. With all our friends there, in a restaurant it could have been mortifying. He said, “You are worth the risk.” She said that experience reminded her of what a powerful thing it is to be chosen. “We all have in common a deep desire for love that says, ‘You are worthwhile. You are priceless. You worth risking for.” God has chosen us, risked and paid for us at cost to himself that is beyond calculation.

You have been given a high calling as a priest of God. You have been chosen for a role of enormous significance. No matter what your station in life, no matter your circumstances, you have been given a job to do that fills every moment of your life with significance. Your life matters now, you matter now, and your life will matter forever.

Something else we should note is there are no opt outs on this deal. Every person who follows Jesus, every believer, is part of the priesthood. This is not just a job for pastors or missionaries. It is the role every single one of us has in the body of Christ. It is what we signed up for when we chose to become followers of Christ. One of the strange things about being a pastor is that people tend to think either more highly of you than they should, or not highly enough. Some people are suspicious of pastors or think very poorly of them because, frankly, many pastors have given abundant reason to make people think they are religious hucksters and hypocrites. But at the other end of the spectrum are those who have respect for pastors, and they tend to think pastors are a sort of different class of human. They are holier than others. I have frequently had people ask me to pray for them and suggest that somehow my prayers are going to be more effective or more powerful than other people’s, because I’m a pastor. I’m sort of above other people, closer to God than they are. So there are actually 4 classes of beings in existence, there is God, and there are angelic beings, and there are pastors, then there are “normal” human beings.

The Bible says no such thing. It says that any follower of Christ has immediate access to the throne of God. No one stands above them other than God. Every believer in Jesus is a priest, just as much as the greatest pastors, missionaries, and evangelists. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are his priest. You don’t have the option of saying, “I believe in Jesus, but I don’t want to be his priest.” If you belong to Jesus, you are a priest. But what does that mean.

WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO AS PRIESTS?

At times the Pope is called the pontiff. In Roman Catholic theology the Pope, the Pontiff, is the head priest, the lead dog in the priestly team. Oddly, that word was derived from the Latin word pontifex. That word, in turn, came from the Latin words *pons*, which meant bridge, and *facere*, which meant “to make.” So pontifex, which was the Latin word for a priest, originally meant “one who makes a bridge,” or bridge builder. A priest is one who builds a bridge between God and man. A priest represents God to humans by proclaiming and teaching his truth to people.

So as a priest, you are to be a bridge between God and humans. You are to represent God to people. You do that both by telling them about God and by the way you live, being a living picture of what God is like. You see this in verse 9 where Peter says we are to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” You are also to represent people to God, and you do that by praying for them.

You might think, “I can’t do that. I’m not good at telling people about God. I’m not a theologian, nor an evangelist.” Here’s the amazing thing. You don’t have to convince anybody of anything. You don’t have to persuade anybody of anything. There was a point in my early years when I was involved in a ministry that was very evangelistic that I began to feel defeated. I discovered I wasn’t very good at evangelism. Part of that is because my personality is a bit more on the introverted side. It’s not natural for me to reach out to people I don’t know. I also found that I just wasn’t all that persuasive evidently. I didn’t have lots of people coming to Christ.

But then I paid attention to what Paul said in Ephesians 2:1. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” People are dead spiritually. It hit me that I don’t have the power to make dead people live. No human does. In Ephesians 2:5 Paul said God, “made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.” God is the only one who can make the dead live. If people are going to come alive to Christ, God has to do it. Humans don’t have that power. So my job is not to make the dead live, to persuade spiritually dead people to somehow come alive and believe in Jesus, which they can’t do. My job is to do what Peter said, to declare the praise of him who called us out of darkness. That’s your job too. For that to make any difference in anyone’s life will require a miracle of God’s grace, and that’s totally up to him.

That makes being a priest much more feasible, doesn’t it? I recall a day when Laurie and I were out running errands. At one store Laurie and the clerk were talking about what a beautiful day it was. Laurie made the comment that she is so grateful to God that he loves us so much he gives us days like that one. That opened up a conversation about the Lord. She didn’t preach the whole gospel to the lady. She didn’t lead her to a dramatic conversion right there in the store. But she built a little part of a bridge to God. From there we went to a postal annex store and in making a transaction there Laurie again mentioned how good God was in a different context. Once again it sparked a conversation. Laurie was being a priest, not being pushy or super religious. She was just declaring the praise of God.

In every interaction with people we can declare the praise of our God by our words and by our actions and our behavior. We can bring them into an experience of his kindness, his love, his forgiveness, his goodness and his patience. When we do we are being priests.

Though we don’t offer animal sacrifices on behalf of people as we represent them to God like the ancient Jewish priests did, we do represent people before God by praying for them. When we pray for people we are being priests, and that is an opportunity to do something powerful for them. Sometimes we think praying for people is the least we can do for them, but it actually is the most we can do for them, for we ask God to act, and nothing is more powerful than God.

More than 30 years ago Laurie and I were trying to buy a house. We had lived in rental homes for 11 years here and had feared we would never be able to buy a home. But we finally had the chance to buy a home. We entered escrow on a brand new home. A week before we were to close escrow disaster struck. Due to our naïveté and ignorance, having never bought a home before, and some wrong information from the seller’s agents the deal fell out of escrow. This happens all the time, but for us it was a disaster because we were going to lose a large deposit to the seller. That meant we would not be able to buy another home. A friend of ours heard about this and told us that he personally knew the builder. He said he would talk to him about the situation. We appreciated it, but the builder’s representatives had been very clear that we weren’t getting that money back. A couple of weeks later, to our surprise and great relief, we were informed that the builder had decided to return that money. Our friend interceded on our behalf, and that made all the difference.

He was kind of our priest in that situation. We have the calling of being priests for everyone we encounter. We can represent them to God. We can intercede for them, and in doing so we are fulfilling our role as priests. What do you think will happen if you ask people, “Can I pray for you?” It is highly unlikely that they will say, “Absolutely not. I’m offended that you would even ask me that.” Almost always even the least religious person on the planet will say, “Sure. I appreciate it. That is a way that all of us can be priests and we can do it in any and every situation.

CONCLUSION

IT STARTS AND ENDS WITH JESUS

He is the Alpha and the Omega, the A to Z, the beginning and end. You have the Spirit of Jesus in you. Thank him for being in you. Love him with all your heart. Walk with him every day. Ask him to empower you and to guide and direct you each and every day.

REMEMBER YOU HAVE AN EXCITING DESTINY

You are a priest of the Most High God. When you are doing the laundry, when you talk to your spouse and your children, when you visit with neighbors and friends, when you shop at the market, when you do your job at work, more than anything else, you are a priest. You are the bridge between every person you encounter and the God they desperately need.

Being a pastor has some down sides because people have lots of notions about pastors. John Ortberg told a story in his book *If You Want To Walk On Water, You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat*, about a pastor he knows named Jeffrey Cotter. He was on a flight home, wearing jeans, tired, just wanting to rest. He was not eager to engage anyone in conversation. He was seated next to an attache case carrying, *Wall Street Journal* reading business executive stereotype. To his dismay, this guy was gregarious and anxious to talk. He told Cotter he worked in what he called the figure salon business. He was excited about how they could change how a woman thinks of herself by changing her body, and that they were really helping people. Then, of course, Mr. Executive asked Cotter what he did. As he had listened the Spirit was prodding him that he should be more excited about what he did than this guy was. But he knew the effect it would likely have when he dropped the pastor bomb on him. He needed to respond, so he got creative. He said, “You and I have similar business interests. You are in the body changing business and I am in the personality changing business. We apply theocratic principles to accomplish indigenous personality modification.” The guy replied a bit hesitantly, “You know, I think I’ve heard of that. Do you have offices in our city?” Cotter said, “Oh, we have many offices. We have them in every state of the union, including Alaska and Hawaii. We are international. Management has a plan to put at least one office in every country of the world by the end of this business era.” The executive asked, “Given how large it is, what is your firm’s management structure?” Cotter said, “It’s a family concern. There’s a Father and a Son and they run everything.” He ended up getting to tell the man about the good news of grace through Christ.

That’s creative, but we don’t have to be that creative. But we do need to remember that our identity, our calling, our destiny, is something to be excited about. We have offices in every state and every country in the world. We are in the most exciting, most important endeavor in human history and we all have an important role to play in it. This is our identity, who we are. We are the bridge builders between humans and God. This is true in every encounter we have with people. It is what we are here to do with our spouses, our children, our grandchildren, our parents, our siblings, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers, our fellow students, the clerk at the grocery store, the server in the restaurant, the nurse in the doctor’s office and everyone else we come across. It is the most important job on the planet. Our understanding of our place, our identity is fundamentally this: we are chosen, we are called, we have a momentous role to play in life, one that turns every day into an opportunity and an adventure.

You once were not a people but now you are the people of God.