



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER
PROCLAIMING GOD’S EXCELLENCIES

1 Peter 2:9-12

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⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹²Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Introduction

This morning, I want us to look at the critically important topic of Mission: what is the mission of the Church. What are we doing on planet Earth as a church? Or more particularly, what are we as Calvary Memorial Church doing in Oak Park, in Chicago? Why are we here? What are we to be giving our time, talents, spiritual gifts, our treasures and our resources to? What are we trying to accomplish, to build, to advance, to see happen? These are all questions of Mission. Over the last 18 months since I have been serving as your pastor, in partnership with the Elders and in conversation with many of you, I have been trying to clarify for us a couple of key issues as a church in this new phase and chapter in our history.

First: Vision. Who are we? We are a city on a hill. Secondly, seeking to clarify values, what do we treasure or is important to us as a congregation in this particular community? Gospel centered worship, Word centered worship, being multi-generational, having a full representation of the body of Christ in the midst of our body. And, as we talked about last week, being multi-ethnic; that’s a value—having a full representation of the universal church within the life of our own particular church. These are some of the values we have been flagging up—things that we think are important.

So, Vision, Value and Strategy as well—the four Ps. Through these ministry strategies proclaiming the supremacy of Christ in both word and deed, partnering with others to advance the gospel, planting new congregations for the sake of new life, and praying for the kingdom to come. But the one issue we have not addressed yet is Mission. It is easy to take it for granted. Jesus has given us the Great Commission and that is indeed the mission of the church to go and make disciples, but what in particular is our mission here in Oak Park, as a church, given who

we are, given our community, given the time that we find ourselves in. What is our particular mission as a church? It is a timely question to address. Some have been asking for clarification and it is good for us to be clear what our mission is as a church. It impacts the way we devote resources, the kind of ministries we engage in, the kinds of things we focus on.

The Mission of the Church

In God's good providence, our passage this morning addresses the question of Mission, and teaches us how to think about the mission of the church. What is the mission of the church from this passage? It is there at the end of verse 9: "that you that you may proclaim the excellencies of him"—that is the mission of the church of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the excellencies of God! Proclaiming the excellencies of God is what we are to be about as a people and as a church. It is why we exist on planet Earth! It is why Calvary exists in Oak Park to proclaim the excellencies of God in this community and beyond. It is how we ought to spend our time, resources, how we ought to spend and deploy all our spiritual talents and gifts that God has given each one of us. That is the mission that Peter identifies in this passage. That has got to be our mission as well as a church: making God's goodness and greatness known far and wide.

First, Knowing Our Identity

This passage also helps us to understand a couple other things about Mission. Here is the first thing: that Mission must first begin with identity before you are unleashed to pursue the mission of God, you must understand who you are as a son or a daughter of God. It is so easy to get the order mixed up, to think that we become something because we are pursuing something. It is critical that the identity precedes mission; that you and I know who we are before we be about the business that God would have us to be about. It is the same in mothering; you've got to know what a mother is before you accomplish the mission of mothering. It is the same perhaps in your workplace. You've got to know what your company or whoever your employer is about, their identity, before you get on with the task of accomplishing the missions that they have for you. So too, in the church of Jesus Christ: we need to understand our identity.

What is our identity from this passage? See in verse 9 how Peter lavishes on the church the most magnificent pile of descriptions of who we are in Christ, called out from every race upon the earth to be a *chosen* race. Many, many thousands of people are passed over sovereignly by God but if you are in Christ this morning, you are *chosen* by God—a royal priesthood. You might not like your job or enjoy it. It might not be what you desired for your life but God has, in Christ, called and commissioned you with a particular profound vocation, namely, to be a royal priesthood; king and priest all in the same—that's who you are in Christ—a part of a royal priesthood! You are a priest and a king making God known in the world. Amazing! A holy nation—that's who you are. Not fundamentally an American, not essentially an American but a holy nation. This is your constitution: God is your King, he is your president; your citizenship is not here, it is in heaven and we await for our King to come from there. That is our home and that is why we are exiles and strangers right in the States.

The fourth and final description of your identity: that we are God's chosen possession. We sang a lyric: God desires us. That is exactly what Peter is talking about here—you are God's chosen possession. Precious and special to him, you are the apple of the Lord's eye; he gazes with fond affection at you because he has chosen you, he has bought you and made you his own. That's who you are in Christ.

It is so critical before engaging in Mission to have a full understanding of our identity, to not think that if we do something for God, we will become something. In the presence of God we already are that, and we are to express that in Mission. Man, it's amazing how confusion over the identity of the church can wreck mission. And thus, we bring all of our individual identities and individual agendas within the life of the church, and undermine the ministry and mission of the church because we are banging into each other. Friction, challenges, tensions, because they are of a certain kind, live in a certain part of Chicago, have a certain cultural background or age, are too old, too young, too edgy and urban and cool. You bring these individual identities, friction and tension that undermine the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. That is why it is so critical, first of all, to begin with identity—who we are as the people of God before we try to step out and serve in the way God would have us to serve. So, that's who we are—a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

Do you embrace that reality of who you are? In the United States, we are people who wrestle with status anxiety, chronically anxious about our status in society. Do you know what the greatest cure of status anxiety is?—leaning into who God says you are in Christ. You *are* this. Just as God says, “Let there be light” and it was, so too, God says to you this morning, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to me,” and it *is*. God does not speak and it is not reality. Whenever God says something, it is reality. This is your identity.

Second, Mission is about God and not Us

Here is the second thing about Mission from this passage: that our Mission is ultimately about God and not us. Interestingly, we begin with who we are; and yet the mission is not ultimately about who we are. Why has God lavished us with all these privileges? The second part of verse 9: “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him. . .” That is the Mission, promoting him, advancing him, making his reputation look good in the world, making him look good, look great, drawing attention to all of his excellencies.

So too here, it is chronic human temptation to make the mission that we are engaged in suddenly, indeed even inadvertently, about us—to slip into thinking that the mission of the church is for me to enjoy with my family a healthy and exciting Christian life. Or, the mission of the church is to help stem the tide of secularism that is invading the United States and push it back to its Judeo-Christian roots. Or, the mission of the church is to propagate Christianity and engage with an arms race war with the other religions of the world so that we can beat them out. Thus we make the mission of the church about us in one way or another, rather than about God, proclaiming the excellencies of God. We have got to exercise tenacity and be vigilant with this; so easy to be pushed off base. My sense has been that, as a church—at least some of us, we are a bit insecure about our reputation in the community; how are we perceived within the community; what do those Oak Parkers out there think about us as a church? I think we recognized that we are well known, have a reputation on being strong on moral issues and taking moral stands, and in many ways that's quite a good thing. Yet, I think we recognized we are not quite so well known as having hearts that are bent to serve the needs of the least of these, the marginalized, the poor. There is a sense of insecurity about that. Thus the human temptation as a church, as we think about advancing our ministry and mission within our community, will be to engage in things that make our reputation enhance us, rather than enhancing the reputation of God. Do you see that?

Can I make it even more practical? One of the great joys in the last eight-nine months has been to see the launch of the Emergency Clothes Closet. Amazing and fabulous ministry! It is

such a thrill to see this well oiled machine led so capably and faithfully week-in and week-out, meeting the needs of the least of these within the life of our community. But you know the temptation I find in my own heart, the temptation as we talk with one another about the Emergency Clothes Closet is to rejoice and revel in the fact that that ministry will make us look good in the life of this community rather than make God look in the eyes of those who serve him. It's very subtle; the mission is about proclaiming his excellence. What are God's excellencies that we are to proclaim? Love, compassion, faithfulness, forgiveness, grace, mercy, patience, holiness, long-suffering, indeed many, many excellencies that God desires for us to make known about him. Can I tell you what the chief of all excellencies is, the heart of what we proclaim who God is? It's there in verse 10: we are to proclaim the excellencies of God because he has called us 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." What is the Excellency of excellencies in the person of God? It is his mercy. So as we engage in mission and make it all about God, we make it all about mercy that is the heart of God. The Elders have commissioned a Mercy Ministry Team to help us think about the programs and initiatives we have going. The critical thing to remember is that ultimately mercy is not a ministry of the church; mercy is the mission of the church. The second point about mission is that it is all about God and not about us.

Third, Accomplishing our Mission Daily

The third thing about mission is this: the mission of the church can be accomplished every single day. Can you proclaim the excellencies of God every single day? What does it mean to proclaim the excellencies of God from when you get up till when you go to bed, when you go out to the grocery store, to work or linger after work in your neighborhood to chat with friends and neighbor? Peter tells us in verses 11 and 12: "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles..." Remember that you are a chosen race and a holy people, but in this world, it means you are a sojourner and an exile. Here is how you proclaim God's excellencies: "to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." Why?—so that you can (verse 12) keep your conduct among those you interact with honorable and excellent. Why?—so that they can see the content of your life as a proclamation of the excellencies of God himself!

So the mission of the church is something you can do every day without even having to come to church. The Pastor isn't the only one who does it. Where is the mission of the church catalyzed, where is the battle and advance of the mission of the church fought and won or lost every single day?—In your soul! Do you see this? It's serious business. You say, "Ah, proclaiming the mercies of God is beautiful. I love it. We should proclaim it. Go-go-go!" It is right in your heart. If you are losing the battle in your heart, you will lose the battle out there and the gospel will not be commended. It is something you do every single day wherever you are. Work, vacation, play, young, old, man, woman, you engage in it every day. The battle is waging in your soul against the passions of the flesh. What are those? In 1 Peter 4:4, Peter says, "With respect to these things they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you" because you used to be engaged in sensuality and passions, in drunkenness and orgies, in drinking parties and lawlessness and idolatry. That certainly the passions that wage war against your soul and you've got to be vigilant to abstain from those. But the passion which wage war again your soul are also those back in chapter 2:1—malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slandering, greed, pride, vanity, covetousness, ungratefulness, unforgiving. These are always waging war against us and that is where the battle needs to be

fought as well so that we can commend the gospel. So our mission thirdly is something we can do everything, tapping right in our hearts.

Fourth, Our Mission is for the Sake of Others

Fourthly and finally, our mission is for the sake of others. We are who we are and we proclaim the excellencies of God, but this is for the sake of others. Your growth in your Christian life, your fighting the fight of faith in your soul, your abstaining from the desires and passions of the flesh, this warfare exists for other people that they would see the life that is the result of that battle that is fought by the grace of Christ, and see the good deeds, the honorable life that flows from that. Look at the end of verse 12: they would see your good deeds and find it a compelling and winsome witness. And though they speak evil of you, now because of the good deeds, your prayer is that they will on the day of Visitation or Judgment glorify God because your deeds have been effective in bringing them to Christ. So our mission is for the sake of others to win worshippers to God.

Conclusion

This is Peter's way of talking about what Jesus talks about on the Sermon on the Mount: you are the Light of the World, you are sitting on a hill; don't hide your light under a bushel. Put it up on a stand that it might radiate out in the community so that people can see the light of your life, your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. This is the mission of the church.

Do you want to be a part of that mission? You've got to come to Christ if you are not. Come to him who is the living stone and be built up in him by faith in the mercy that is ours in Christ Jesus, and then to abide in Christ day in and day out as we resist the passions of the flesh and live lives that radiate out the light of the gospel into our community. This is the mission of the church.

Amen.