

God's People

1 Kings 8: 1-30 & 1 Peter 2: 4-10

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 16th October 2005

125th Anniversary Celebration: A Service of Thanksgiving & Recommitment

Close your eyes, if you will. Take a deep breath. Relax. And imagine with me *faces*. See all the people connected with this church over these 125 years, all the people who have come through these doors and sat in these pews. See all the parents who brought their children to the font to be baptized. See all the children who came forward to receive their first Bibles or teenagers who first confirmed their love for Jesus here. See all the men and women who professed their love and commitment to each other in this place. See the faces of all the people who have share their gifts, their lives, their passions, and their struggles. Think of all the people here on Easter mornings or Christmas Eves. See the faces of the people who have been fed at this table and nurtured. Look at the faces of all the visitors across the years, of people who were here for only a brief time. See the faces of people who have moved away, or who have left the church, maybe disappointed about someone or something (this is the church after all). See the faces of the people who used to sit beside you, the saints who have gone on before us, those we have said good-bye to, for now, the saints who were remembered here in this holy place. Imagine all the people who have gone on before us, who now sit at table with the Lord in his banquet hall, and imagine all these saints surrounding us now, all the people who know God face-to-face, imagine them here, standing on the periphery of this sanctuary, smiling at us. Open your eyes.

The true history of any church is written with flesh and blood and inscribed upon the heart of God. It is easy to tell the story of a church by the looking at its building. But of course the church is not the building (Remember: "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and see all *the people*.") It is common to tell a church's story through its pastors, but the church is not its pastors. The church is, quite simply, a people, a special group of people *set apart* and *called out* by God to do God's work – which doesn't necessarily require a building or pastors, for that matter (although, I don't want to imagine a world without beautiful places to worship and I'm not trying to talk myself out of a 'job.'). This is the one thing I feel called to lift up this morning. It's nothing you haven't heard before, but it is something that needs continually to be reclaimed and is *costly* when forgotten or ignored. The church is a people – but not just any people, *God's* (!) people – simple and profound.

I am so grateful for the church of Jesus Christ, for what I learned early on in the church and continue to learn from you. Indeed, there are moments when I am just so overwhelmed and amazed by God's grace, so moved by the depth of God's love for me and for people and for the world. There are moments of awe and wonder that leave me breathless when I consider who Jesus is to me and to all of us, when I reflect upon all that he has shown me and all of us, when I fathom in my gut and get it – and I mean *really* get it (which are rare) – just how generous he has been to me and to all of us and when I have a glimpse of the dreams God wants to realize through me and through all of us. *Do you know what I mean?* You know what I mean, when you find yourself marveling, caught up with praise and thanksgiving because you realize what an extraordinary *treasure* is the gospel. And then it never ceases to amaze me that God then entrusts the care and sharing of this priceless treasure to *us*, with people, with the church, *with us*.

This speaks volumes, friends, about the *kind* of God to whom we belong. God actually trusts us with this treasure. This also speaks volumes, friends, about how God sees us. God considers us *trustworthy*, capable of caring for it. Indeed, God is counting on us to do so. That's why all the saints surrounding us are, I believe, smiling because they know first-hand that God is counting on us and they know what we are capable of doing when we remember who we *really are* and *claim it*.

That's my hope and prayer for us today as we recommit ourselves to God. To remember who we are and claim this identity in ways we never have before or maybe were reluctant to or fearful to! There's no place for fear in the kingdom of God. We act from either love or fear. Every decision we make is either in love or fear. For the opposite of love is not hate, as we might think, but fear. And perfect love, scriptures tells us, casts out fear (1 John 4: 18). In love we need to love ourselves even more, individually and together, to imagine ourselves the way God sees us and God sees us with delight. God wants us to remember who we are. We can only fulfill the purpose of our lives when we claim who we are – *who we really are*. Not groveling in sin and critical judgment and fear, but people who know grace and mercy. Peter's majestic epistle makes this clear. This is who we are: a chosen race, a royal priesthood mediating the presence of God, a holy people, indeed God's *own people*. Accept your acceptance, because God has a job for us to do "in order that you [all] may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."¹ For truth be told, there was a time when we were not a people, when we were lost, estranged, confused, but now we are *God's people*; there was a time when we didn't know what it

¹ "Accept your acceptance" refers to a line in Paul Tillich's (1886-1965) famous sermon, "You Are Accepted" in *The Shaking the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955). It can be found online at: www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84.

was like to know God's mercy, but now we have received mercy. Now proclaim it, live it, share it, continue becoming the people God knows we are, so that others might come to know that they are God's people, too.

In Marilyn Robinson's recent Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead*, she brings to life a parish minister, who writes a series of letters to his very young son to be read when he is older. He wants his son to know who he is and to know what it means to serve the church. It is one of the most poignant books I have read. Toward the end of the book, the author of the letters, the Reverend John Ames, says to his son, "Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it." ["Prevenient" meaning "coming first," grace comes first to allow us to accept God's grace.] "Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient *courage* that allows us to be brave – that is, *to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm*. And therefore," he writes, "this courage allows us, as the old men say, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing."²

Precious things have been put into our hands. All the saints around us are depending upon us to do what they could not do, cheering us on to see what they could not see, expecting us to treasure and share the gospel in our time just as they were faithful in theirs. So by God's grace, let us be brave and courageous and "useful," stepping out into God's glorious future, claiming and reclaiming who we are as God's people, honoring what has been placed into our hands. *Thanks be to God!*

Rev. Kenneth E. Kovacs

Catonsville Presbyterian Church

Catonsville, Maryland

² Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), p. 246. Emphasis added.