

{I was tempted to preach an old fashioned sermon today. But those were typically 3 to 4 times longer than a modern sermon. With the service being longer, I decided to stick to a normal sermon length.}

A couple weeks ago I ran across an article about the missing cornerstone at the U.S. Capitol building. It said,

"There is embarrassment in Washington. A search is currently under way for the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol... Much to the dismay of researchers and excavators, there is no cornerstone..."

I was flabbergasted. The article was 14 years old, so I decided to see if that was still the case. I did a little digging. Sure enough, no one is sure about the location of the capitol's cornerstone. They know that George Washington ceremonially laid the original cornerstone. But then with all of the additional building, the original cornerstone got lost. It was thought to be rediscovered in the late 1990s, but that turned out to be an incorrect claim.

The article then went on to talk about the importance of cornerstones in buildings. It said,

"Cornerstones have always had a symbolic and sometimes structural importance. They mark. They signify. They help join other stones. A cornerstone is always in the foundation, never on the roof. When the cornerstone is missing below, some identity is likely to be absent above."¹

Our Epistle reading this morning from 1 Peter uses the image of the cornerstone to describe Jesus Christ. Peter tells us, "Come unto him, a living stone...a chief cornerstone, chosen and precious."

This is a wonderful image. For Christians, Jesus is our base, Jesus is our foundation, Jesus is the cornerstone of the Church. The Church is built, as Ephesians says, "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone." As we'll sing later in the words of the old hymn, "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."

The cornerstone establishes the location and structure of the building. Once you place the cornerstone, the other walls can be built out from it. Other stones are placed in relation to the cornerstone. They are joined together to construct the building.

That's important for us to remember, especially in our individualistic culture. We're not a bunch of loose stones lying around in a field by ourselves. We're called to be joined and to be mortared together in relationship to Jesus and to each other. Together, Peter says, we form a house, a spiritual house, not a physical one.

What a wonderful image for us on this day we mark the beginning of our centennial year. Over the years several buildings have been built for St. Paul's. The cornerstone of this

¹ Peter W. Marty, *The Christian Century*, April 24, 1996

building dates back to 1941. More importantly, over the years, we've been joined together as a community of faith in relationship to Jesus Christ, our chief cornerstone.

Thus this is a day of celebration and thanksgiving.

But it's also a day to look ahead. It's a day to begin to build for our next hundred years. If we are God's spiritual house, how will we be building or rebuilding on the foundation laid during our first hundred years?

Those are good questions for us to be asking in the coming year. How will we build on our foundations? What will we be about in mission and ministry in our next hundred years?

Such questions require deep spiritual discernment. Because it's not up to us to design the house. The plans for the church of Jesus Christ are not left up to us to draft. The blueprints of our spiritual house are not ours to determine.

That's because the house itself belongs to God. We are simply called to join with our fellow Christians to be part of God's design, as a community of faith. And as part of that structure, as part of that community of faith, we have an identity, and we have work to do. And by chance, today's epistle reading from 1st Peter deals powerfully with those twin questions of who we are to be and what we are to do.

First Peter tells us what our identity is. Peter says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." Those are strange images for modern people: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

Chosen race. I think the word "race" catches our eye and trips us up. Instead, we need to focus on the other word. The operative word is "chosen." We are chosen, chosen by God to be his church, his people. This is not an ethnocentric or racist term. As we heard in Revelation a couple weeks ago, God chooses his followers from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

But we are chosen. We are called by God to be part of his church. It's God's church, not ours. It's God's plan, not ours. We are chosen and invited to participate. But we're not in the driver's seat. God is. And if we lose sight of that reality, we're in trouble.

Royal Priesthood. The operative word here is priesthood. We're royal because we're called to be priests of the king of kings. But the central term is priesthood.

In Israel, only a select group of men of one family could be priests. And this small group of priests in Israel was set aside for a specific purpose. They were to be intermediaries. As priests they would stand between God and his people. They'd offer worship and sacrifice up to God on behalf of the people. And they'd declare blessings to the people on behalf of God.

Yet in the Old Testament, over and over again, there also is a very real sense that all of Israel was called to be a priestly people. They were called to do for the world what their priests

did for them. All the people of Israel were to be a priestly people, to do a priestly kind of ministry. They were to be intermediaries between God and the rest of the world.

So when Peter declares that the church is also to be a royal priesthood, he's saying that the function of the church is to be priestly. The church is to stand between God and the world. We are to serve the world in God's name. We are also called to bring the rest of the world into relationship with God.

That means that you have priestly ministry. Don't be fooled because I've got the collar and the stole. Yes, I am a priest. More specifically, I am an ordained priest. I do have a unique and special role to play in this community. But I'm not the only priestly person here. All of us who are baptized are called to a kind of priestly ministry. No, you won't be standing at the altar celebrating Eucharist. But you are called to be intermediaries between God and the world. After all, at the end of every baptismal service, it is all the people who say to the newly baptized, "Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood."

Holy nation. The operative word is holy. Holy means "set apart" or "distinct." Because we are God's chosen, priestly people, we're called to live in a different way from the rest of the world. If we're not distinct we won't do any good. But we are called to be distinct, to be light in the darkness, to salt that gives flavor, to be yeast that changes the entire lump of dough.

There's a delicate balance here. If we're too distinct and separate from the rest of the culture, we won't be able to influence it because we'll be too isolated. But if we're too much like the culture, we'll blend in so much that there's nothing distinctive about us.

We are called to be part of the world. But we're called to be different enough from the world that we can have an influence on it. That's what being a holy people is all about

Peter says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." That's our identity.

Yet Peter doesn't stop there. He also tells us what our purpose is. Because we are a chosen and holy priesthood, we have a job to do.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The "in order that" is essential. It's not just about who we are to be. It's about what we are to do.

St. Paul's was not placed here to be a social club. Yes, fellowship with each other is important, but that's not the most important thing we do. St. Paul's was not placed here primarily to take care of the needs of its members. Yes, as a Christian community, we want to love each other and help each through difficult times. But that's not the most important thing we do.

Instead, Peter reminds us, we are called to proclaim God's mighty acts, to tell the story of Jesus Christ, to let the world know that what he has done for us has made a difference in our lives, and that it can make a difference in their lives. We are called to invite them to come and join us.

100 years ago, St. Paul's had 16 members. We have grown because those members invited other people into the fellowship of our congregation. We have grown from that original group of 16 because God gives us such important work to do.

If St. Paul's is going to be a vibrant place at our bicentennial 2110, then we have work to do now at our centennial in 2010. Yes, I know that Episcopal Churches are shrinking all over the country. Yes, I know that mainline churches are shrinking as well. But we don't have to be a slave to national trends. We have our own ministry to do, here, in Lubbock, Texas, in the 21st Century.

We offer an ancient pattern of worship that is glorious and hard to match.

In a polarized world, we provide a place where all sorts of people with differing opinions can gather together to worship the living God.

I think we're the best-kept secret in Lubbock, Texas. But we're not going to grow by sitting here doing nothing.

We'll have to step out of our comfort zones. We'll have to work to grow.

The people of St. Paul's in 1910 worked hard. We the people of St. Paul's must do no less in 2010.

And we must do so, not because it's a good idea. We must do so because we're on a mission from God.

We've been called to serve as a royal priesthood, offering glorious worship. We've been called to be a holy people, forsaking darkness. We've been called to live as God's own people, as an example to the world.

In our second century, let us proclaim to the world the Good News of Jesus Christ, who has called us to live in his marvelous light.