

*From the Pastor Jeff Schooley's Desk:  
A Sermon for Sunday, May 7, 2023*

"Who do you think you are? Where do you get off?"

I'm guessing you've heard those two inquiries – typically given in frustration and anger – either in your real life or, at least, in TV and movies. If you have or had teenagers, you may have even heard your own exasperated voice say these things. If you were a rebellious teenager, you might have heard your parents' voice when I began with those questions.

I'm not sure these questions have ever started a productive or meaningful conversation, but I love them all the same. I love them because they reveal one part of the hidden logic our God has built into life and reality. That logic goes something like this: our identity – "who do you think you are?" – naturally leads to our ethics – "Where do you get off?". Of course, I doubt any fuming father who is saying this in bathrobe and slippers at 2:15 a.m. has ever realized he was speaking God-ordained questions, but – hey – even blind squirrels and nuts and all that jazz, right?

I probably adore this question because I spent a decade trying to become a Christian ethicist – and will spend my remaining decades trying to do something productive in that field – and one of the things I realized in all my studies is that all ethics are rather arbitrary. That is to say, to say "X" is good and "Y" is bad is tough to prove in any meaningful, objective, or empirical way. Ethics is not like Physics. There's no ethical equivalent to the law of gravity. Sure, sometimes good people do good things and good results, but we can just as easily think of contrary examples – good people doing good things to ill results; bad people doing bad things and seemingly benefitting from their malfeasance. Meanwhile, in the world of physics, that apple is always going to just keep falling on Isaac Newton's head.

As a result of every ethic ultimately being rather subjective, we are forced to figure out which subjectivity is better than others. The model most consistently presented to us in scripture is to root our ethics in our identity. That is to say that "being" precedes "doing" every time. It is not that we are incapable of acting out of character, but that we know to do so is wrong. We perform our identity as a way of finding harmony and peace within ourselves and, ideally, with the rest of creation. But here's the rub: Identity can be just as subjective as ethics if we don't have a higher source to whom we may appeal. Well, thanks be to God, then, that we have our reading from the Apostle Peter, for Peter goes to create lengths to make sure we know both who we are *and* who Jesus Christ is since our identity extends from His in our baptism.

Let's begin, because it is proper to do so, with who Jesus is. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected, but who has become the cornerstone all the same. A cornerstone is, based upon my limited masonry knowledge, an essential component to building any brick edifice because all other stones get built out and up from it. As such, slanted, wobbly, malformed stones are insufficient to the task of a cornerstone. It would be like trying to build a Lego set with a janky piece that got chewed up by the dog. Other pieces just aren't going to click into place like they should.

And so, Peter presents Jesus in all His rejected-ness, all his seeming unfitnes for the task of building a stable world. And why is He rejected? Because He came preaching peace to a violent world, came preaching generosity in a greedy world, came preaching kindness in a vulgar world, came offering liberation to a world built upon enslavement. Moreover, for all His good works, He was hung on a cross. Crosses are for murderers and rebels. Nothing on a cross, so worldly logic goes, can be all that useful... and certainly can't be the thing upon which all else is built. No, Jesus was an intriguing speaker, a gifted healer, but His fate would seem to be the final word on His life.

And yet, this is where the majesty and power of God comes in, for it is this crucified stone – all busted up and chiseled out by iron spikes – that God elects to be the cornerstone. And then, as for us, we are living stones that are mortared to the cornerstone and to one another. But Peter isn't done there. "Living stone" is poetic within this cornerstone metaphor, but it is also a little nonsensical, even oxymoronic. So Peter doubles down, making sure we know without a shadow of doubt, who we are. We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." This is our identity – and our ethics must build out from it, just as each of our "living stone" lives build out from Christ the Cornerstone.

But, okay, let's take a minute and address some reasonable – even if just contemporary – concerns that come with these identities. For example, in almost no other cultural context would speaking about being "a chosen race" not insinuate a form of extremism. I mean, if you go out for a drink with a buddy at a bar called "The Chosen Race," you're probably going to assume everyone inside has shaved their heads, right?

"Royal priesthood" isn't much better. Neither royalty, especially the beleaguered British monarchy, nor priests, especially Roman Catholic priests, are having their best season in terms of branding and public approval. I would get it if being called "a royal priest" might be unnerving.

"A holy nation" isn't much better. Domestically that sounds like Christian nationalism. If said in a Middle Eastern context, we might just as well hear "terrorist." Only "God's own people" passes the sniff test, at least in our contemporary context.

But here's the thing: that dis-ease with such designations is misplaced. It's misplaced because we are a "chosen race" in a manner completely different from racial hierarchy. And we're a "royal priesthood" completely divorced from the corporate power implied by both words. And why is this? Because all of these identities still extend from Jesus, the rejected cornerstone. That is to say, we live out our chosen, holy, royal priestliness from the humble position of being rejected, of being on the outside, of seeing our identity extend into an ethic that is out of step with the world's ethics. Put simply, to live as an alternative to the status quo of the world.

For what does the world expect in a leader? Strong. Powerful. Charismatic. Wealthy. Influential. And what do we find in the life of our Lord? Hung on a cross. Dining with sinners. Routinely having His teachings misunderstood, even by His closest

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companions. Carrying no money pouch for Himself. And only influential until the authorities crack down on Him, at which point even His closest disciple rejects him – not once, not twice, but three separate times. Well, if this is who we call “Lord,” and if it is from Him that we receive our own identity, then what else can we reasonably expect but to be a little out of step with the world. In every way, Jesus is an embodied alternative to the world’s status quo, which means so will we be.

I’m borrowing this notion of the church as an alternative witness to the world from my oft-cited, dissertation-subject, theological ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas contends that the world doesn’t even know it has rejected Jesus until it can witness our lives being built alongside His into a spiritual house. That might seem odd to contend – that is, that the world doesn’t know it has rejected Jesus – until we remember that evil does not need to turn every one of us into a little Hitler. No, evil merely needs us to not notice the evil that Hitler is doing, or not care, or think that it’s okay because it isn’t happening to us, but rather to “them” – you know, whoever “them” is.

And so, let’s try to get comfortable with these inherited identities. For example, I’m okay with an identity like “a chosen race,” because when we see who God chooses, we should be shocked. In God’s mouth, “chosen race” hardly means inherently superior or necessarily violent toward others. In fact, a little self-reflection is helpful for understanding this nuance of “chosen.” I mean, who am I to be chosen? A chubby, depressed middle-aged man with anxiety and an auto-immune disorder? Yeah, that doesn’t quite cry “first round draft pick,” does it?

And while some of you might be doing alright for yourselves, I haven’t espied a single royal in our midst, though we get saddled with this identity too. As for a holy nation, well, by definition no one person can be that, but the Church collectively – across time and space – is this holy nation. And what makes our nation so weird is that we don’t have borders that we feel like we have to constantly defend. In both modern and historic politics, nations only know they’re nations based upon the reach of their sovereignty. Borders are essential for the world’s understanding of nationhood, but not for Christ. We stand as an alternative witness of living stones that eschews “border security” in favor of being mortared more closely to our cornerstone Christ.

All of this can seem rather abstract, even as it remains essential that we understand how our identity can extend into our ethics, so let me return to an example from the life of this church that I know I’ve used in the past. It strikes me as deeply significant to the spiritual health of this church that we make consistent space for three people-groups that the world *also* routinely rejects – La Conexion, BGOPride!, and WLI. You’re not going to have to scroll too deep in any given day’s headlines to find examples of brown and queer bodies being maligned and defamed by the power brokers of our society. But I actually think WLI – what some of your long-timers here in BG might better know as “Wood Lane Industries” – is our best example.

Nationally, about 3-percent of all people have intellectual and/or development disabilities.

That’s not a huge number, but also not insignificant. For example, Bri and I share 365 friends on Facebook. If those national statistics hold, 11 of those shared friends should have a developmental disability. I’m not sure if more than 2 or 3 do, though. So, where are the remaining 8 or 9 hiding? Good question. They’re sequestered away by a society that does not deal well with difference. And lest you think that maybe Bri and I are just really prejudiced in our friend-making, consider this: If you leave here, swing through Kroger, and then Walmart on some errands, you will undoubtedly pass by 100 people (if not more). Do you think you’ll encounter three or more people with a developmental disability? Maybe. Depending upon who’s bagging groceries at Kroger, I suppose. But I’m also guessing for most of us, we can go about our lives for weeks on end without a single, even momentary encounter with such an individual.

And this is what is so significant about this church making space for roughly 35 hours each week for 20 or more individuals with these disabilities. Following our Lord who the world rejected, we’ve come to learn how important it is to spot *other people* whom the world rejects – and to see the Christ within them. *This* is a key ingredient to what makes this church faithful and fabulous. It’s also proof that we’ve let our identity in Christ influence our actions and behaviors.

And so, my friends, my fellow freaks and geeks, those of us with pill cases full of pills we use to keep our bodies working, those of us who see that sign outside that says “History Lives Here” and it feels like a joke about our age; you all, my menagerie of nerds and Valedictorians and PhDs with dissertation topics that will *never* trend on Twitter, lean into your God-gifted identity and let that inspire your commitment to embracing and loving all that the world rejects. And hear, once again, Peter’s concluding words, updated by yours truly: “Beloved weirdos, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of a prejudicial world that does violence to your souls and others. Conduct yourselves like your rejected Lord would, even and especially when that means you’ll be rejected too, because your deeds honor the Lord and give dignity to other outcasts, and because – one day – those who have rejected Jesus and you and so many others will glorify God when they see that you actually got it right in the first place.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.