

John 14:1-14
1 Peter 2:2-10

ON THE WAY

It was Clayton's fourth birthday, and because four years old is a very special age, his mother told him that he could have any kind of birthday party he wished. "I want a party where everybody there will be kings and queens," Clayton replied without a moment's hesitation. His wish was granted.

His mother started to work, creating a score of golden paper crowns, royal blue crepe paper robes with gold lining, and scepters made from coat hangers and cardboard. Then the afternoon of the party came. As the young guests arrived, they were delighted to receive royal crowns, robes, and scepters. Everyone at the party was either a king or queen. Everyone had a wonderful time at Clayton's party. All the guests enjoyed cake and ice cream. They had a majestic procession up to the end of the block and back. All looked like kings and queens. All of the children believed they were kings and queens. And, they all acted like kings and queens. They behaved in a most regal manner.

That night, when the guests had all gone home, when the cake and ice cream had been cleared away and Clayton was being tucked into bed by his mother, Clayton said, "I wish everyone in the whole world would be a king or queen - not just on my birthday, but every day." (Told by William H. Willimon)

The good news of the Gospel is that, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, something kin to what Clayton wished for happened two thousand years ago. In 1 Peter 2, which is the epistle lesson for this 5th Sunday of Easter, we discover that we, who were nobodies, became special somebodies. Because of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave, all who follow him on the way are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (verses 9-10). If we can trust that that Good News is true for us, then perhaps - like Clayton and his friends at the birthday party - we will start acting the part and living into our grace-filled inheritance as the beloved and precious children of God.

Maybe it's helpful to ask, "How do we act like the beloved children of God? And, where do we start if we want to live the life that bestows upon us the high honor of being called God's own people? The Gospel reading for today, from John 14, provides us with the answer to these questions.

It was the last night that Jesus spent with his first called disciples. Jesus and the Twelve were gathered together in the upper room. Jesus' time with them was growing short so he had to choose his words carefully and impart to them the main points of his ministry so that they could carry on in his place after he was gone. He had washed their feet and he told them to do the same in humble service with each other. He followed this acted-out teaching lesson with a new commandment that "you love one another. Just as I have loved your, you also should love one another."

Then, he asked them to believe or trust in God as well as himself, especially in light of the events that would take place over the next several days and throughout the rest of their earthly lives. Jesus told them that in the Father's house there are many dwelling places, which means there is room enough for all. Also, Jesus wasn't referring to a specific space or place up

there; no, he was inviting his disciples into an ever-deepening relationship with God. Thomas wanted to know the way so that he could be clear about how to get from here to there. Jesus said to Thomas, the other disciples in that upper room, and his disciples (including us) down through the ages, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Jesus' use of another I am statement here in John's Gospel harkens back to the scripture lesson from Exodus 3 that Jenny preached on last week in which Moses was encountered by God at the burning bush. When Moses asked for the divine name, Yahweh answered him, "I AM WHO I AM." Thus, Jesus' use of the I am statement was his way of claiming to be one with God the Father. Jesus is in the Father, and the Father is in Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God. And so, Jesus is the way to God. Jesus helps us to see God and be in relationship with the Holy One as best as we possibly can.

It's interesting to note that in the Acts of the Apostles (9:2) the earliest title given to the growing number of Jesus' followers was "the Way," and I'm sure it's a direct reference to Jesus' claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life." The first disciples of Jesus were called the Way, not because of their beliefs; after all, it would be almost 300 years before the early Church could really articulate its faith about who Jesus is and how he relates to the Father and the Spirit. No, those earliest followers of Jesus were called the Way because they were more concerned about behaving like him; they wanted to follow and imitate their Lord and Master. They wanted to be sure that they acted just like him. Thus, when he gave them a new commandment to love one another, they took that to heart and went and did likewise. They loved others because Jesus loved them.

They were not only on the way with Jesus to God so that they could enter into a more loving, deeper, and committed relationship with God, they also understood that Jesus is the Way by which God comes to us. When we look at Jesus and see his boundary-breaking, barrier-smashing love, his far-flung compassion for the downtrodden and the sick, and his gracious way with sinners, then we see God. When we see Jesus reaching out to all, sitting down to eat with all kinds of people, and embracing them as sisters and brothers, we are peering into the very face of God.

And then, to take it a step further (because it doesn't stop with us), Jesus is also the way that God not only comes to us but works through us. God is reaching out to others, beckoning to them, and welcoming them home through us. In verse 12, Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

For the longest time, I puzzled over how anyone of us could ever do greater works than Jesus did. But I've come to understand that when Jesus lived and walked the earth, he was limited by time and space, just as we are. He worked only in a very small part of the world and he had direct contact with only a few people. But after he died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, after he went to the Father, his power and his spirit were no longer bound by time and space. He could now work through his growing number of followers and all those who believe in him around the world. We too are part of the greater works that Jesus mentioned. The spirit of the Risen Christ is at work through us so that we can be one of the many ways that God is present in the world and gathering more and more people into the kingdom.

If we return to 1 Peter 2, we discover that it is solely by the grace of God that we have been invited to "Come to him (the risen Lord Jesus, who is) a living stone." Then, it is noted that

we ourselves are like living stones that are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood. However, we are not the end of the process; rather, we are a means to an end. Right after we hear that we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," we are told the reason why - "in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into the marvelous light." God is calling us and using us to be the way that God enters into the lives of others to embrace them and to invite them to make their home with God.

Jesus isn't the only stone. Granted, he is the chief cornerstone, but we too are stones, living stones, members of Christ's family, who have now become God's unique incarnation in the world. We are God's people, and we are called to proclaim God's mighty acts. We extend God's love with our words and through our actions. God works through the community of faith to spread Christ-like love throughout this hurting and darkened world and help lead people back home to God for they have lost their way.

There is a story about a traveler from Italy who came to the French town of Chartres to see the great church that was being built there. Arriving at the end of the day, he went to the site just as the workmen were leaving for home. He asked one man, covered with dust, what he did and the man replied that he was a stonemason. He had spent his day carving rocks. A second man responded that he was a glass-blower, and he spent his days making colored glass. Still another workman replied that he was a blacksmith who hammered iron for a living. Wandering into the dark gloom of the unfinished building, the traveler came upon an older woman with a broom in hand. She was sweeping up the stone chips, the wood shavings, and glass shards from the day's work. "What are you doing?" he asked. The woman paused, leaned on her broom, looked up toward the high arches, and answered, "Me? Why I'm building a cathedral for the glory of Almighty God!" Far more than a lovely, physical structure in which to praise God, we are called to do our part and help build a spiritual house where many others may praise God and be loved and welcomed home by God.

Susan Andrews writes about a family retreat in her church. We played a wonderful game of softball but the game was of a mutant variety. The softball was almost as big as a volleyball and the bats included one for T-ball. The youngest player was five, and the oldest player was about sixty-five, and every age in between. Everybody was welcomed and wanted on the team. Everybody got as many pitches as they wanted to hit the ball. It was Sarah's turn. Because of a genetic disorder, Sarah's brain doesn't always connect with the action that is needed. Her father helped her swing the bat, and when the hit came she started to run - but in the wrong direction. What happened next was amazing! As a single organism, every person on the field swung into action. They called to her, they helped her, and they all did what they could to lead her to first base. When she went straight from second base to home plate - nobody corrected her. Instead, we all cheered for the run she had just scored. I stood there with tears in my eyes as Sarah basked in the affection of the crowd. On that ball field, we had become the body of Christ - an alternative community with distinctive values - values of love and grace and tolerance that declared to the world that each child of God is precious.

Let us be followers of the Way, of our Lord Jesus, who is "the way, the truth, and the life," who is the best way for us to come home to God. And, let us give thanks - thanks that God comes to us through Jesus, and thanks that God has bestowed value and gifts upon us so that we can be one of the ways God comes to many others through us.

We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people!
Let us not only believe that good news, let us act accordingly as we live "on the way" - to the
glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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