

With all the discussion about the realities of culture, it can be difficult to hear read scripture without being colored by our own culture. The words from 1 Peter about a “chosen people” can be terribly misunderstood, depending on one’s experience with those two words. The Greek word for people (“genos”) has been translated as nation, generation, people, and even race. *What it means is a group of people with something uniquely common.*

As with any texts, we must hear 1 Peter in the context of all Scripture and in the embrace of God’s love. When any text is taken out of context, or interpreted on the basis of one’s experience the richness and truth of what is shared can be lost. Let’s think about *chosen-ness* and “nation, generation, or people” in a more appropriate way.

People are the ultimate gift of God’s creation. God did not create “race” but He did create people, and Genesis reminds us that all are created in the image of God. There is a closeness to God’s heart for ALL people, different than for any other part of creation. The diversity of people, just as there is in the world of birds, fish, or mammals is part of God’s creative plan. One would think such diversity would be a PLUS! Yet we live in a world that has created the word “race, or nation, or generation” to divide or control, and it gets in the way of living up to the image of God which all are called to be.

And the word “chosen” brings up another issue. IF any group is “chosen,” the assumption is that others aren’t. Those called “chosen” can feel superior to or protected from those who aren’t. If any do not feel chosen, the anger of exclusion can create hatred and envy. Such perspectives lead to war, oppression, and undeserved suffering.

God’s “choosing” is different than ours. Rather than arbitrarily seeing the strongest, the fastest, the most beautiful, or the least threatening, he says I CHOOSE to LOVE ALL! And why would he not? Has He not created all? And whether black or white, young or old, African or Arab, all are children of God and brothers and sisters in the gift of creation.

The differences we stumble over are the creative gifts of God. Diversity and variety are God’s greatest gifts. How boring it would be if each was a complete mirror of the other; if all had the same strengths and weaknesses, tastes and talents. Chosen-ness is a gift of grace; it is the beauty of the Genesis story.

And yet we live in a different garden today, and are surrounded by separation, suspicion, misunderstanding, and mistrust. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter speaks of what Christ has done to change our perspective and renew our God given potential. In this Easter season we celebrate what lengths of love God has undertaken to bring us back to the garden; to recreate what has been lost. While “race” is a human invention to point out differences, the gift of a baby in a manger and an empty tomb is God’s way of bringing us back to our senses. By grace there is only ONE “race” and ALL are “chosen.”

From the cross, Jesus reached out to an entire world. By emptying the tomb, He unwrapped the gift his birth was meant to be. Christ entered into a world that missed the mark, and stumbled in its purpose. He offers forgiveness, undeserved grace, and a call to become what He means us to be. If there is to be any “race” there is only one. And if any are to be chosen, it is all.

How special this good news is! We are chosen not to be superior but to respond to our servant call. Not to be uplifted but to relish our opportunity to wash feet and serve others as Christ Jesus has done for me. When we hear “chosen race” this is what God means. And it is great news!

We are CHOSEN not because of who we are, what we have done, or how we look, but because Christ loves us. It is no different than the gift of family – we can’t choose our parents, but their choice brings us to be. In a more perfect way our relationship with Christ is based not on deservedness or good deeds, but God’s choice in creating and loving me.

Even if others seek to manipulate or take advantage of our differences, we are loved. We are chosen. We are called. And so are all! Nation, or grouping, or race can never be the issue – but chosen-ness is!

With this good news as our gift, what next? Listen again: *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were NO PEOPLE now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Sin tempts people to feel superior or complain about being oppressed. The Gospel calls those who understand the grace of being chosen to use our diversity of gifts to proclaim to the entire world that this is God’s gift to all!

How painful it would be for someone in your family never to know they are loved! How tragic for any human to not know the good news of Jesus’ saving love. Because WE know who we are, we understand what our call is to become. With chosen-ness comes responsibility and purpose. With salvation comes the call to serve, that others will know that same love.

Even Mother’s Day can help us to understand what the words of this text mean. Whether a mother had carried her child in her womb, or adopted that child from another, that child is “chosen” and the relationship with Mother and Father makes a difference in terms of one’s identity, nature, and purpose.

As children of God, our “chosen-ness” is determined not by background but by Christ! Your CALL is to use every opportunity, and the unique gifts that are “you” to share this Good News that others will know the gift that has been given for them.

I have had the blessing of participating in some funerals that would appear to the world to be extremely difficult – and it is that example that I would use to finish making my point. One high school student in this congregation was tragically killed. To a world obsessed with justice and fairness this caused incredible confusion.

This young man had been confirmed several years earlier. Part of our celebration of that event is for each of our young people to design a stole for their confirmation. A stole, like I wear as pastor, is a symbol of the burden of ministry – like a yoke that was used years ago to carry buckets of water from the well. This young man had chosen the symbols that represented his faith and put them on his stole.

His family put that stole on his coffin and that became the sermon to his classmates at his funeral. He knew he was chosen. He knew he was loved. And even though his earthly life had ended, he proclaimed the gift of heaven through that stole. His friends heard that his life had meaning, purpose, and a future.

And that is our message today. None of us know what we getting into, but we must always be clear what we are getting ready for.

*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation! Like living stones that would be lifeless rocks without the breath of God's Spirit, you have been chosen to assume a new shape by God's love for you.*

Now ... why would you EVER want to keep that a secret, or withhold such a beautiful hope from those who are still trapped by the confusion of a world obsessed with its own powers, priorities, and fears? If the news is GOOD (and it is!) let someone know! -tws