

Holy Nation?
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“A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” That’s quite a label the letter of Peter gives the church. But listen to same verse in the King James Version: “But ye are a chosen *generation*, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a *peculiar* people. Sometimes I am very aware of the passage of generations. In the summer season of family reunions, at times of birth and death, we gather in multiple generations. Sometimes these events make us all too aware of the “peculiar people” in our clans.

Of course, the seventeenth century translators of that verse had a slightly different sense of that word in their minds than the one we normally use. They meant ‘special’ or ‘set apart’ rather than ‘odd’. Even the word ‘generation’ had more of the sense of family or tribe than a specific age group. So this passage may be talking about a special kind of family.

I suspect we all think our families are special. People often develop a fascination with their ancestors, their roots. I know my mother did: she left reams of paper and photos behind tracing her family back, looking for her origins. There was a sense of pride there. It was as if when she discovered a connection to a famous person or event, it somehow proved *our* worth. But there was a sadder side to her research. She had been profoundly deaf since infancy, and I think she was always looking for proof that deafness did *not* run in the family. So there was a relentless scanning of the past, of our family tree to discover good things to celebrate, and to prove that bad things were *not* inevitable.

Some of her research had an unintended effect on me. Some of her ancestors came from the states of Virginia and North Carolina. Years ago she casually mentioned that my great grandfather probably belonged to a group of white men who rode around at night making sure that the recently freed slaves didn’t misbehave. She did not use the name ‘KKK’ but I’m pretty sure I knew what she meant. So that takes pride in one’s ancestry down a notch. I have to recognize that this is part of my heritage. What do I do with that? Well, I think about my great grandfather’s generation, and my generation, and how society has changed. And then I look around and see the legacy of hurt and injustice that remains. Both sides are part of my inheritance: my white privilege which is a hindrance to justice. And I am drawn to those things that will correct the wrongs of the past. Each time I went south to work on rebuilding burned African American churches with my children and your children, I was mindful of my family, was it was and what it is. I am encouraged by my children’s engagement on these social issues. I - and my children - are formed by the *whole* story of our past.

Families need to tell their stories. People need to know where they come from. If they don’t know, they will probably make it up. Pride is necessary. The ethnic pride that so many of us feel when we honor our ancestors’ countries is a rich part of our present culture. Pride in our parents’ achievements is a way of honoring them. But neglecting the stories of mistakes and hurts produces a dangerous amnesia. We understand ourselves and our needs and our problems and our strengths through knowledge of our families. We need honest autobiographies. This knowledge of our peculiar history will give us the tools to “conduct ourselves honorably”, as Peter’s letter says. It may also allow us to forgive each other. Each generation *is* chosen, in the sense that we have a calling to live out a faithful response to our past, present, and future.

What about the words, “holy nation”? Americans have a tradition of self-understanding as a special experiment in democracy and justice. It is a kind of patriotism, but it is based on a sense of peculiar purpose, a sense that we are in the world to show what good governance can do. This has its roots in the religious life of the early European settlers here. Fleeing religious persecution and economic oppression gave the “aliens and exiles” the drive to make a new world order honoring individual worth and initiative. They truly felt “called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.” They could say with truth, “Once we were no people, now we are God’s people.” Many of us have a feeling for the righteousness and nobility of our country’s ideals and history. Our national autobiography is a story of struggles for fairness and sacrifices for freedom. We need to tell that story.

But we also need to know that our nation was born and reared in violence. Many of you have heard about a resurgence of interest in Alexander Hamilton, based on the popular musical on Broadway. A while ago I read a biography of Alexander Hamilton that described America during the 1790’s. The Revolution was over, the Constitution was in place, everything should have been set for a time of peace and prosperity. But in the space of a decade, at least three armed rebellions sprang up, involving thousands of angry farmers. Taxes and foreclosures on farms drove these people to desperate measures and Americans were killing each other. People bought and speculated on veteran’s benefits. Many Americans could not vote, including all women, all slaves, and all those who did not own property. The state of Massachusetts had an established church. So much of the freedom and opportunity and security for the individual that we now take for granted simply did not exist. Of course, we could review much of our nation’s history with a lens on systemic injustice and violence.

So our holy nation, our peculiar way of life, comes to us with legacies of high purpose and human failing. What do we do with that legacy? How have we been formed or deformed to deal with the present and the future? Only with national self-knowledge, only with true national autobiographies, will we be able to move into a fairer, freer, and more peaceful tomorrow. We will be drawn to those things that will correct the wrongs of the past. Rose-colored glasses won’t help us here. A pleasant amnesia is dangerous. Stories need to be told, stories that will challenge and inspire us to become the holy nation we believe in. This may allow us to forgive our nation and move on. Each nation *is* holy *and* chosen, in the sense that we are called to live out of our distinctive past and into a better future.

The church in this passage is described as a “royal priesthood.” Those words seem a bit pretentious to us, perhaps, left over from a world of kings and temple priests. Even at the time they were written they were a bit of a stretch: none of the earliest Christians were from royal families, none would have served in holy rites at the temple. On the contrary, they were likely to be poor and downtrodden. But once again Peter was speaking of the “set-apartness”, the special role of the Christian in the life of the world. Those who had gone from being no people to being God’s people, who had gone from no mercy to mercy, were supposed to be examples, ministering to the world in the name of God. They were to embody and make visible the good works and honorable deeds that showed God in the world. And in Sunday School we learn of the nobility of Christians through the ages as they have tried to live this out.

Meanwhile, through other sources, we hear about the corruption and degradation of this calling. Both individual Christians and the institution of the Church have failed, over and over again to live honorably. War, oppression, persecution: all the crimes committed *against* the followers of Jesus were later committed *by* those who prayed to him. There are really too many examples to list. This is part of our story, our heritage. But we need to claim it as the church’s autobiography, not tales told by outsiders. It is only by learning the complete story of our past, how we have been blessed and cursed, how we have succeeded and failed, how we have lied and spoken the truth, that we can understand our own time and our own calling.

Part of our tradition is based on stories about Jesus. Today we heard a story from Luke's gospel about "the mission of the seventy", when Jesus sent a large group of people, not the twelve disciples, but other followers out to heal and preach in the countryside. This is a kind of prototype of Christian mission. On one level, it is inspiring. All the healing missions and hospital work that we support have roots in this passage. But over the centuries, mission has not always been a matter of Christian lambs going among pagan wolves. Non-Christians have been sometimes converted at the point of a sword. Profound misunderstandings of local cultures and virtues have led to real oppression. The good in the story can be twisted.

Later in the service we will celebrate communion, based on stories we read in the Gospels. This is a special time, full of meaning, a source of comfort and joy to so many. We draw close to God and each other as we break and share bread. But this special sacrament has been a source of conflict between Christians, dividing us from each other. A few centuries ago, a person could be put to death for holding one belief or another about what happened when the prayer was said over the elements. Jesus' great gift to us was twisted into a point of contention and division. This too is part of our church's story.

What can we do with our church's autobiography, these stories of faith and hope and love, and failure? We can recognize how we are formed and molded as spiritual people by this story. We search for the deep spiritual truths offered to us over thousands of years by people attuned to God. We look around and see how the church has changed. And we can look around and see where hurt and injustice remain. We can live as people who look at the past honestly, hold fast to the good and name the wrongs. Maybe we can forgive our spiritual ancestors for their failings. I hope so. But we have been given the gift of knowledge so that we move forward into marvelous light. This is our job, not that of our critics. The church *is* chosen, in the sense that it is given the responsibility to shine in the darkness.

Are you chosen? Yes. Am I? Yes. We cannot change our past. But we can treat it as a gift. We can treat the past as an opportunity for transformation. God has begun the work. Once we were no people, but now we are God's people. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy. Let's live out stories, in our families, in our nation, in our church, that reflect the blessing and challenge: we are chosen.

And now I invite you to turn to the prayer of St. Francis printed in the bulletin after the sermon, and read it together with me:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is discord, union;
Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; Where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand; To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen