

Scriptures: Exodus 19:3-6, 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10  
Title: *A Royal Priesthood*

Exodus 19:3-6

<sup>3</sup>Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites:<sup>4</sup>You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup>Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and <sup>5</sup>like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

<sup>9</sup> **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.**

<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people;  
**once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy**

When I was in third grade my family moved to a new home, and me to a new elementary school. The new friends I made at this new school, they became my primary group of friends from third grade through high school. And this group of friends was pretty diverse. Not Chicago or San Francisco diverse. Nebraska diverse. We were religiously diverse at a time when the majority of people in America claimed some form of Christianity as their religion: of our little group, there was a Mormon, a Catholic, a couple of Presbyterians, a Jehovah's witness, a Lutheran, and me – the Mennonite. Like quite a few of our children and youth here, I was the only Mennonite in every school I ever attended (outside of the years that my brother and I were at the same school). There were numerous slumber parties and campouts where we would spend hours explaining and debating the viewpoints of our faith tradition – defending our churches and our families (as our families were tied closely with our religious heritage) – hours of David explaining to us who Joseph Smith was and why there were eleven kids in his family; of Jason explaining to us why he was given another middle name at his confirmation and trying to help us understand purgatory; of Matt telling us why he had to leave the room when we sang “Happy Birthday”; and me, explaining why we did not believe in war – why my uncle went to dig wells in Africa rather than go to fight in Vietnam; why my pastor did not pay all of his taxes and protested against the death penalty; why my parents would never buy me that \$100 Starter Jacket like they all had.

When I think about the various reasons that I ended up a pastor, I think this group of Nebraska-diverse friends was a big part of that – that these guys forced me, from a fairly early age, to try and defend my flavor of Christian faith. I think this group made me ask questions of

my own tradition, to listen and understand why we did what we did, or thought what we thought – to understand why we were a bit weird. Of course we all come to our understandings of faith in different ways, but for me, part of what made me fall in love with a Mennonite perspective of Christianity was this group of guys who had different view; because we challenged each other's different views. We talked about our differences and distinctions. We did not stay up late over Mountain Dew and Doritos passionately talking about how we were all pretty much the same and all the things we held in common – we discussed and argued our differences. These questions forced us to go back to our families and Sunday School teachers and clergy to ask questions, as we sought to understand our peculiarities as people of faith.

This morning we continue our series on the “The Church”, today focusing on a Anabaptist-Mennonite view of the church. Not that our view of the church is the only or best view, but in the hope that understanding distinction and peculiarity helps us to better understand ourselves and the world around us. Whenever I am asked to speak or share at an Interfaith event of some sort, I try not to tell a story or piece from our faith that sounds like “we all believe the same”, instead I try to tell a story of Christian oddness or peculiarity, to say that “here is a unique way in which we see this particular situation.” It does not diminish other ways, nor is not to say that we worship different Gods. Within our distinction we can say, “We worship the same God, and here is a way that we see God a bit differently”, “We Worship the same God and here is why we think Jesus makes a difference” , “We Worship the same God, and this is why we try to follow Jesus in this particular way.” The hope is that in understanding and honoring some of our differences, we are all strengthened in who we are – that we all become better at living out who God has called us to be – that we are affirmed in the face of God that we seek to lift to the world.

And so, my hope this morning is that for those of you who do not consider yourselves Mennonite-Christians, that this sermon/lecture helps you consider your own perspectives or views on a deeper level; that it helps you to be more faithful to your understanding of who God is and how God has called us to be “The Church”. And for those who attend this congregation and/or consider yourself a Mennonite-Christian, I hope it helps us to understand better who we are and how we work (in both our function and dysfunction), and that it strengthens us to be who we believe God has called us to be in this time and in this place.

I think that might be the longest preamble to a sermon that I have ever given.

Okay, now to some Mennonite distinctive of how we understand “The Church.” Some of these will be shared, of course, by other denominations and groups of Christians, and some of them will be unique to a Mennonite understanding.

### **How do Mennonites understand ‘The church’?**

#### **1. Voluntary.**

The church is something that you must chose for yourself. The church is not something that you can be born into, but something you must chose – those born into the faith, must, at some point make a choice whether or not this is the way of life for them. This is seen in that Mennonites, like some others, do not baptize babies/infants. We baptize people when they get to be at an age when they can say, “this is the life I want to live, trying to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ.”

#### **2. Discipleship-focused.**

We have historically emphasized a way of living and following Jesus in life more than we have emphasized the moment of conversion; we generally speak more of the journey of faith over a lifetime more than a specific moment of conversion. Or, we might say, we believe conversion happens through continual action and growth; continual obedience and seeking to follow the God we meet in Jesus Christ. So, we understand the church to be a place focused on making disciples, on forming disciples over a lifetime.

### **3. We believe the church to be communal, not hierarchical.**

We think that it is in community that we interpret Scripture and understand the leading of the Spirit of God. That your opinion is just as important and valid as my opinion, even though I am the only one here getting paid. This is probably best illustrated in this pulpit here, that it is small and not elevated – there are no stairs that lift the pulpit above the seats of the congregation. This does make it a little hard to see, especially during Intergenerational time, but it also is communicating a message intentionally, that the pastor is not elevated above the congregation; that the pastor is not separate. This is also why Mennonite pastors don't wear robes or stoles, because we are not to be thought of as set apart or elevated.

### **4. Jesus-centered; Jesus-focused.**

We read the Bible through the lens of Jesus' life and teachings. When we are uncertain about something in scripture, or believe the scripture to be giving different messages in different

places, we look to what Jesus said or did on the topic to answer the question. We say that Jesus' life and teachings is for all of our life: work, being citizens, for being church members.

#### **5. The church is meant to work from the edges.**

We believe that the church is not to be in a position of power in the world or aligned with the government, but that the church is meant to work from the edges. To be in relationship with people on the edges of society, and to work for change from the edges of any society – that we will always feel like aliens and outsiders, no matter what country or culture we live in.

It is still debated by some whether or not America is a Christian nation or not, or whether America ever was a Christian nation. More and more Christians are recognizing that we are not a Christian nation any longer (if we ever were), that we are not in power to legislate our view of morality, this is seen in that even small towns have grocery stores and movie theaters open on Sundays. Historically, Anabaptist/Mennonites have accepted this position, that Christians are to be on the edges. Mennonites have believed that we do not try to convert the powerful or those at the top, but instead to work at community from the sides; to not seek control or assume that the majority of reasonable people might agree with our position. So, we have worked at change in trying to be an alternative community on the edges, to be an example of another way of living, and to work with others on the margins.

#### **6. Finally, the part I want to spend a little more time with, is that **we are a Confessing Church.****

What this means is simply, **that we say (we confess) that Jesus is Lord.** In saying this, what we are saying is that Jesus is Lord, not Cesar; that our primary allegiance in all of our lives is to

God. Jesus is Lord, not Capitalism, not America, not Military power, not technology, not Money – Jesus is Lord. The God we meet and know in Jesus Christ is who our ultimate and primary allegiance goes to.

This is referenced in both the Exodus passage and the 1 Peter passages we read this morning. The Exodus passage referring to how God called out Israel to be a distinct and holy people, a Royal Priesthood that would bless all the nations of the world.

The New Testament writers pick-up this idea for the church, that Jesus lives on in the church, Christ's body, and that this becomes visible where the church follows Jesus to the point of contention with the larger world (or society). And so we are called to be a Royal Priesthood, a group of people who live with our allegiance to God.

For Mennonites, trying to be a Royal Priesthood has played out in a couple of unique ways. One of these ways is in attempts to be a holy and pure community. There has been an emphasis for Mennonites to be pure communities, free and separate from sin – communities that are a light to the world by being free of sin. In attempts to be a holy community, Mennonites have often set-up boundaries around their communities – both physical boundaries pertaining to dress, technology and transportation; and moral boundaries related to what behavior is and is not holy and pure. This has caused Mennonites to not only work at forming community, but it has led to many church splits – groups splitting in attempts to stay holy or pure. This explains some of what is happening in our denomination at the moment, some churches leaving in their attempt to stay holy and pure. In the view that accepting homosexuality is a sin, groups leave/split from

those who are welcoming gays and lesbians, saying that we can only be a pure Royal Priesthood if we remain separate from this sinful behavior.

Of course, there is a differences of opinion over what makes us a light to the world, what makes us a Royal Priesthood: Is it our ability to remain pure? Is it our ability to love extravagantly? Is it our ability to forgive one another and remain in community?

And this plays out in our relationship to the state or government. The Mennonite Confession of faith says, “We believe that the church is God’s ‘holy nation,’ called to give full allegiance to Christ its head and to witness to all nations about God’s saving love.” It continues, “Governing authorities of the world have been instituted by God for maintaining order in societies ...but like all such institutions, nations tend to demand total allegiance.”

Not matter how good a government is, or how much we appreciate our country, our primary allegiance is still always to God. This is seen in the reality that most Mennonite churches do not have American flags in them. At Hesston College, a small Mennonite school in Kansas where I attended, they came under scrutiny a few years ago because they do not fly the flag on campus. There was a proposal in the US legislature that they should not be able to receive any public funds for their students unless they started flying the American flag. Hesston does have the US flag, however, it hangs in the cafeterias with flags from other countries around the world. The US flag is not elevated in position, but holds the same position as the many other flags. A symbol of this institution confessing that Jesus is Lord, that part of this confession is their attempt to form young people who are concerned not just with the good of America, but the good of all the peoples of the world.

In the past few weeks many of you have likely heard of the controversy started with Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers did not stand for the national anthem in protest over the way that Black Lives are treated in our country. Many people did not appreciate his form of protest, even if they perhaps agreed with his message. What his protest brings up for me, is the recognition that I feel discomfort every time I am asked to stand for the National Anthem, every time I am asked to put my hand over my heart. In this act, I must ask myself, what does this action mean if I claim that Jesus is Lord? Is this action showing allegiance to a country over my allegiance to God?

I usually stand silently, trying to be respectful, not wanting to draw attention to myself, or not sure if sitting is a good witness, or simply not wanting to stick out or have to have a conversation or have people say things to me. But, I always stand with discomfort, not sure if by doing so, I am in fact confessing that America is Lord, rather than Jesus.

However we view this, in the end, what it means to be a Holy Nation or a Royal Priesthood, it surely means that **we will often feel discomfort with what is happening around us** – that we will often feel like the ways we feel called to live are at odds with much of our surrounding culture. Sometimes this will be discomfort with the actions of our government. Sometimes it will be discomfort with the values of our culture. Sometimes it will force us to act in ways that are unpopular.

*May the Spirit of God empower us to be a Confessing People, confessing with our lives  
and with our words that our allegiance is to God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.*

*Amen.*