

“Genuine Affirmation of Our Worth”

1 Peter 2:2–10

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In his book *Leaving Home* Garrison Keillor includes a story entitled “The Royal Family” (pp. 139–145). Grace Tollefson gets involved with a dashing but reckless man named Alex Campbell who drives a 1936 Singer coupe and always keeps a bottle whiskey in the trunk. People try to warn her, but she won’t listen. They get married and quickly have three children whereupon Alex leaves her.

Grace has no choice but to return home and accept help from her family and the Lutheran church, along with a little expected judgment. She knows what people think. *We were right, we told you, now look at you.* Grace tells her youngest child Walter that his father was descended from Scottish nobility, he just had a problem. But grandma Tollefson sets the record straight, saying, “Huh! Those Campbells were all alike. There wasn’t one of them worth mentioning. But it’s not your fault, Walter. You didn’t ask to be born into this world, now did you?”

Time passes, Grace and her children endure, and one day a letter arrives from a man in Philadelphia doing research on Scottish nobility. He encloses a check for \$15, requesting information about Alex’s ancestry. Grace tells the writer what she knows, and not long thereafter she receives another letter addressed to “Your Royal Highness,” saying, “Today is the happiest day of my life as I greet my one true Sovereign Queen.” The writer says Alex is descended from King James VII and the Bonnie Prince Charlie. He’s not just a drunk, it is amazing!

Grace and Walter are transformed by this news. They hold their heads high and wait to hear more until one day Alex calls. Walter answers. His Dad needs money, a lot of money, because he is being charged with fraud. He made up family trees for people... “You didn’t,” Walter says, “God. You did this to us. Why did you do this to us?” But he doesn’t tell his mother, only that his father needs help, so that she can hold on to the belief that they are part of the Royal Family.

I think of this story today because there are people all around us like this family who have been beaten down in every way imaginable, people in desperate need of being lifted up, and while there are always parties ready to con them, there is also something in the very heart of our faith which offers genuine affirmation. We are all part of a royal family in Christ, shaped by grace, imbued with value, filled with purpose.

This is the message of our reading from 1 Peter. There probably aren't many verses from this book we can quote, but if there is a passage we know, it is the one we have read. It shows up in hymns like our hymn of discipleship today. It is linked to the Baptist belief in the priesthood of all believers. And it is quoted in our worship order every week, just after the benediction, under the chimes. You know that, right?

But in essence, this brief passage is a pep talk for early believers living under great duress. They are a small community under imperial threat and at odds with others of Jewish tradition, but they should hold their heads high, the writer says, because they are part of a spiritual house where Christ is the cornerstone.

The language should sound familiar. It's not just that we use this image for the church but that it is shaped by texts in Jewish tradition. In Isaiah 28:16 God speaks of laying a cornerstone in Zion for the people. Psalm 118:22 says that the stone the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone. In Joshua 24:27, Israel's leader establishes a stone as a reminder of the covenant God has made with the people.

But it's not just the imagery of stones and buildings representing the church that have precedent in Jewish tradition; the subsequent verse, which refers to the church as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, does as well. And the closing words of this passage are taken directly from Hosea. "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

These promises are rooted in ancient tradition. They reflect a longstanding desire of God to embrace all people as God's own. We find this identity in Christ. In him we experience mercy, we are affirmed as people of value, we find our place, and nothing can take this away.

There are many ways we are beaten down and tempted to question our worth. A broken relationship, the loss of a job, some failure or disappointment, can drag us down. So can the bullying of peers or comparing ourselves to some unreachable cultural standard. Simply thinking we have to prove ourselves, which many family systems build into children, can lead to self-loathing. And some churches proclaim an angry God who can never be pleased, thus filling people with guilt.

But the message of our faith is that we are beloved children of God by creation, embraced in grace through Christ – a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, our text says, that we may declare the praises of the one who calls us out of darkness into this marvelous light.

In his book *The Struggle to Be Free* Wayne Oates put it this way. He grew up with feelings of inferiority due to poverty and limited education in his family, but when he learned about God’s affirmation of him, this transformed his self-view and relationship to others.

The Word of God, the Logos, the person of Jesus Christ, was my redemption from feelings of inferiority. From then on, I felt it a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me, nor, at the same time, to think of any human being as superior to me. From then on, I began to look *across* at all people. I work at this as my daily discipline; to walk *humbly* with God and *comradely* with people. For all of us are made in the image of God. All of us are bought with the same price of the death of Jesus Christ. All of us who once were ‘no people’ are now the ‘people of God.’ (p. 43)

It is a word of radical acceptance, but it lies at the heart of the Gospel. We are part of a genuine royal family. We are people of great worth.

But this is not just a message for us. It is a message we are called to share. How do we do that? How do we lift others up when they are beaten down? One way is with words of affirmation. My grandmother called me “An angel a’walkin’.” My parents, sisters, and cousins didn’t seem to agree,

but who was I to argue with my wise grandmother? I think of Aibileen Clark's words to young Mae Mobley in *The Help* – you is kind, you is smart, you is important. Linking such human affirmation to the biblical assurance that we are God's people is important, but human affirmation alone goes a long way. We need words of correction too, but we all need people who simply lift us up.

But sometimes something more than words is required. I think of a recent action of the Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, pastored by the Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley. They raised one million dollars to prevent 338 families from being evicted. There is nothing that beats a person down more than losing their home. Saying to such a person, "You are a beloved child of God," is nice, but doing so without offering tangible help isn't worth much, according to James 2:14-17. Helping families keep their homes and their dignity is. We haven't done anything quite this bold, yet, but there are many ways we offer more than words – clothing, food, hospitality, advocacy.

I also think of a story Barbara Lundblad tells in *Feasting on the Word* (Year A, Volume 2, pp. 463–465). A Union Theological Seminary student worked with a group called Picture the Homeless as part of her senior thesis project. For months she worked with homeless people in New York and then planned a service on Hart Island, the city's potter's field where over a million people are buried, many of them homeless.

The service ended with a ritual of placing purple Post-it notes with names — real, anonymous, or imagined — on a sheet. It took a while to get them to stick, creative rituals are often difficult to implement, but when they finally did, everyone could see that the anonymous names were not chosen at random. They spelled out in all caps — WE ARE HERE. We are here, even though you may not know our names, even though we are buried in mass graves, we are here, we are still God's people.

It was a powerful message which applies to all God's children — rich or poor, black or white, citizen or immigrant, and any other distinction we can name. It's just that some people need to hear it a bit more desperately. Once we were not a people, now we are the people of God. Once we had not received mercy, now we have received mercy. This is God's word for us and all people. Thanks be to God!