

## *Our Relationships with Others*

August 25, 2002  
Background Study

This is the third week in the eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” In the first sermon in this series, we examined the invitation God extends to us all, an invitation to follow Jesus Christ and embrace a new way of being God’s people. Last week, we looked at the nature of our relationship with God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ. This week, we’ll consider our relationship with others in the community of faith.

*Key Scripture Passage – 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>But 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.

### *Community*

Last week, we saw that *covenant* is one of the key themes in the Bible. We concentrated on what we might call our “vertical” covenant relationship with God. Now, we turn to our “horizontal” covenant relationships with each other, as lived in a *community* of faith called into being by God.

Though community is one of the key images in the Bible, grasping the biblical understanding of community is very difficult for most Americans. Daniel Migliore<sup>1</sup> rightly suggests that there are several good reasons for this:

- Americans are deeply individualistic and private people. We tend to cherish our independence rather than our interdependence. We tend to compartmentalize our lives into church stuff, home stuff, and work stuff.
- Most of us are turned off by bureaucracies, including church bureaucracy. The church ends up seeming to us to be a place of rules, procedures, and meetings, rather than a spirit-filled fellowship of Christians.
- Many Christians and nearly all non-Christians see in our churches a vast gulf between what we proclaim and our actual practices. For many, the church ends up being seen as a home for hypocrites.

Yet, despite these barriers to understanding, we are called by God to be his people, charged with being the light to the world, working toward the restoration and renewal of all creation. In the New Testament, there are literally dozens of images of God’s people, the church. These images cluster around four key themes<sup>2</sup>:

- We are called to be the *people of God*. This image abounds in both the Old and New Testaments. Here are two of many examples. “I will walk among you, and be your God, and you shall be my

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<sup>1</sup> Migliore, Daniel I. 1991. *Faith Seeking Understanding*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns

<sup>2</sup> also from Migliore

people” (Lev 26:12). “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9).

- We are God’s *servant people*, called as a community into lives of service for Jesus’ sake. These images reinforce the Biblical claim that we are not called or saved for our own sakes, but for the sake of the whole world.
- We are the *body of Christ*, becoming one body through our participation in one Lord, one Spirit, and one baptism.
- We are a *community of the Spirit*, filled with the gifts of the Spirit. We are charged with using these gifts to build up the community of faith and to be a good witness to others. (see 1 Cor 12:4-7)

### *Jesus’ Church*

Jesus told Peter, “you are Peter and on this rock I will build *my church*.” (Matt 16:18, emphasis added) In the original Greek, the word is *ecclesia*, which we translate as “church.” This Greek word, *ecclesia*, was used in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint<sup>3</sup>, to translate the Hebrew word, *qahal*, which was the Hebrew word for “assembly.” Thus, we might think that *ecclesia* means nothing more, and Jesus intended nothing more, than some sort of public assembly. But Jesus meant much more. *Ecclesia* is part of a whole family of Greek words meaning things like “to call,” “calling,” “to call out,” and “to invite.” Thus, the *ecclesia* is to be an assembly or congregation called out by God and “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2:20-22).<sup>4</sup>

### *Life in the Community, Life in the Church, Life as the people of God!*

As we live out our covenant with God, our promise to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves (from Mark 12:28-34), we are to do so as a community of faith, as a covenant community! As Richard Hays puts it, the community of faith is the “social manifestation of the people of God.”<sup>5</sup> (p.196) The moral instruction in the New Testament is for the people of God, as a group, as a body, i.e., corporately. God’s call for our corporate obedience is seen in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2).<sup>6</sup> Living within God’s moral will is something we do as a community, as the body of Christ. As Hays notes, we must hear Jesus’ ethical mandate in *ecclesial* terms when we seek God’s will not by asking first “What should I do?,” but rather, “What should we do?” (p.197) This is the foundation for the relationships we have with others in the body of Christ, the people of God.

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<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. By 300BC or so, there were large numbers of Jews who did not read Hebrew, so Jewish scholars in Egypt created a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, which is called the Septuagint. The New Testament was written in Greek and, often, the New Testament writers quoted from the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see Thomas Oden’s, *Life in the Spirit*. 1992. Peabody, MA: Prince Press (a reprinting)

<sup>5</sup> Hays, Richard B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. New York: HarperCollins

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, in modern-day English, “you/your” can be singular or plural, unless you are from the South and sensibly use “y’all” for the plural! In Greek, however, there is a singular “you” and a “plural” you. When reading Paul’s letters, unless “you/your” clearly refers to an individual, Paul is using the “plural” form and is addressing the community. Our tendency is to read Paul’s letters as if they were written to specific person rather than to congregations.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> Genesis 17:9-14 God gives circumcision as a sign of the covenant, a “badge of membership” in the people of God!</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Leviticus 19:1-18 – God’s word for the assembled congregation of Israel</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul appeals for unity amid diversity</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Colossians 3:11-15 Paul teaches about life in the community of faith</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> 1 Peter 1:13-2:10 Christians share a new identity as the chosen and holy people of God</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Do you agree that we Americans tend to be pretty individualistic people? If so, why is it so hard for us to hear the good news as a community rather than a bunch of individuals? How might reading the NT as a people (the “we”!) change our understanding of what it means to be a Christian? How can we begin truly to read the Bible as a community?
2. We are called to live as the covenant people of God. How might our covenant relationship with God help us to understand our relationships with others? What ought to characterize our covenant relationships with others in the body of Christ? How would these covenant relationships differ from relationships we have with those living outside the covenant?
3. Peter writes that we are “a holy nation, God’s own people.” What do you think he means by a holy nation? What does it mean for you, as an individual, to be holy? What might it mean for us, as a congregation, to be holy? How would we go about growing in holiness – as persons and as a congregation?