

Called to Worship

^{NRS} **1 Peter 2:1** Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation--³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and⁵ 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.⁶ For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,"⁸ and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.⁹ 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.

Bruce Courtenay in his semi-autobiographical novel The Power of One¹ opens with a gripping story of growing up as a young boy in South Africa during the Boer war. Now, because of Apartheid most folks are aware of the clash between the white and black communities in Africa, but many have forgotten about the extremely violent relationship between the British and Dutch, or Boer (meaning 'farmer' in Dutch), colonists resulting in the Boer war from 1898 to 1901. Melissa and I were reminded of the Boer war recently because we subjected ourselves to an old Shirley Temple flick- "The Little Princess", anyone remember that one? Shirley Temple plays a little girl who randomly breaks out into song and dance whose went off to fighting in the Boer War in South Africa. We both agreed it was proof that sometimes a movie you like as a kid doesn't always hold up all that well a few years later.

¹ Thanks to both Bruce Courtenay for his wonderful novel as well as John Shea, who used this story to great effect in his masterful sermon: "You Are Greater Than You Know" delivered on 30 Good Minutes, November 19,2005.

Well, Courtenay tells the story of a young boy whose parents are killed and who grows up raised by his Zulu nurse. When he is old enough his nurse makes great sacrifices to send him off to boarding school- trying to give him a chance in the world. And the school is a good school- the only problem is he finds himself the only British student surrounded by an all Boer, all Dutch crowd. You know, after the Olympics I feel like I have a better sense of how frightening that must have been. No offense Rik and Irene, but those Dutch skating fans with the orange and the costumes were definitely the most intimidating bunch I think I've ever seen. I mean you have to be a little nervous about a guy dressed as 6 foot tall tulip, or a screaming woman with a dreamcycle orange face wearing a massive windmill on her head. This is just not normal.

And sadly, it turned out to be a terrifying experience for the young Courtenay. Hated and ridiculed at every turn, one of the worst things possible happened- his nerves on edge, the boy started to wet the bed. Can you imagine it? Your parents are dead. You're hundreds of miles away from the home you have left. You're surrounded by boys who don't speak your language and hate you simply because of where you were born. And then, like a little baby, you start wetting the bed. And it's not like he's got a private room or anything. It's not like he can even hide the problem- you know, take out the sheets before anyone else can see. No, surrounded by other boys, they discover him immediately.

The boys know just what to do, too. The older ones take control of the situation, they wait until the teachers are busy, and they haul the boy out into an open place. They tie rags around his eyes, blindfolding him. The younger boys have hauled out his still wet mattress. They forced him onto his bed. They hold a mock trial- pronouncing him

guilty. And then, making sure the punishment fits the crime, they soak him and the mattress marking him like wild dogs claiming their territory. And this didn't happen just once- but again and again and again.

Well, when at summer break finally came, the boy fled back home weeping into the arms of his nurse. Telling her everything, she held him, comforting him, and she thought about what to do. And then it comes to her, and she holds the boy, rocking him back and forth telling him to hush, that she will ask the great medicine man Inkosi Inkosikazi to come and he will fix the boys problem with the night water. And true to her word, in a few days, the boy saw a cloud of dust on the horizon- and he saw the cloud getting closer, and closer. And finally, coming down the dirt road to their home, the boy saw the biggest, shiniest, black buick he had ever seen in his lifetime. And when the car came to a stop, out of the door stepped the skinniest leg he had ever seen in the world, and connected to the leg was the oldest man he had ever seen, and the man was wearing just a loin cloth and under his arm was a fine looking rug. All the servants had stopped what they were doing when they saw the man. Even the birds in the air stopped chirping- even the wind itself seemed to stop blowing. The boy knew this had to be Inkosi Inkosikazi. And the boy knew immediately, this man could help. And for the first time in a long, long time- the boy felt something, something like hope, begin to stir in his chest.

Help. Help and hope- this is what the community hearing the letter of First Peter was looking for as well. Now, we don't know exactly who wrote the letter of First Peter, but we have a fairly good idea as to what the community was up against. More than any other letter or book in the New Testament, the letter of First Peter uses the language of exile to describe the experience of the church. The church of First Peter is small, unimpressive, and constantly being harassed both by the government and by the comparatively more successful philosophical schools and mystery religions present in the first century. And the tough thing about this criticism is that because church wasn't all that impressive, sometimes it was hard not to listen to these voices. I mean the church was a puny little thing in that day, confined mainly to groups meeting in homes- they didn't have big, beautiful buildings just yet, or the kind of large numbers that impress by sheer size. And so other, seemingly more successful groups, taunted them. Christ the light of the world? Pretty dim, flickering bulb. You Christians are the hands of God? Pretty weak hands for the Almighty. And the church of First Peter couldn't help but look at themselves and wonder sometimes as well.

And then in steps the author of First Peter with just the words the church needed to hear. See, First Peter catches the church at a precarious moment, a dangerous moment- he catches them when they are confused about where to find their center. He catches them being influenced by those around them telling them bigger is better, and that being faithful means being successful. And because they really don't look or feel all that impressive- he finds them faltering.

And it's right at this point that he rings out just the call the church needed to hear- but, it's a strange call if you ask me. It's a strange call indeed.

See, in this situation I would expect the author of First Peter to be something like a football coach. You know, it's half time, the team is way down, and they're all looking to the coach- and after he yells at them a little bit, then he inspires them by telling them that they can do it. He tells them they have what it takes- that things might look bad, but that they are going to triumph. I would expect the author of First Peter to train his eyes on those believers and tell them to keep their heads down and to try harder and that if they do so, they'll get their buildings- they'll get their reward.

Strangely, though, he doesn't do this. Strangely, he doesn't focus on them and their future at all- rather he calls them simply to come as they are, and to know that's more than enough.

Listen to what he says: "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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." First Peter doesn't promise believers great buildings with gigantic television screens and lighted signs- he says what's more important than all of that is the kind of community, the kind of spiritual house, God has already made them to be.

Yeah, First Peter, but what about those other groups- look how large they are, look how popular those other faiths are. Look at what they're able to accomplish. First Peter responds: "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." See, First Peter reminds us that while we are to respond to grace, our job isn't so much for us to work ourselves into a frenzy that we run around like the social workers to the world and fix every problem and perform every

miracle, our first call is to worship and point to the one who already working these mighty acts in our midst. See, First Peter reminds us our primary call, our first job, isn't so much *to do*- as it is *to be*.

You know, one of the transformative moments of seminary came when I was reading Karl Barth for a class I was taking on being a Christian Vocation and faith in the workplace. Now, I was just thinking I was going to whip out a paper on how it's not just ministers that are called, but how we believe God calls each of us to particular jobs and tasks. Yawn. I mean it wasn't exactly the most novel idea in the world- but I was focused on writing a thesis and had been in school at that point for what seemed like forever and figured I didn't have to come up with something earth shaking for every class I was in. And this was basically the main idea of this class- how vocation is basically our responsibility and just kind of a fancy, dressed up word for work. And so I was just reading through ol' Karl Barth hoping for some support quotes that I could just plug in and get this stupid paper finished, when the strangest thing happened.

I kept reading and reading in Barth's IV.3.2, his volume on Vocation, just assuming he would stick pretty close to Luther and everyone else saying how great Protestants are because we think it's not just priests whom God calls but butchers and bakers whom God calls as well. And I read and read, looking for something like this- nothing. I saw the words vocation and call again and again and again but never as our responsibility- but always as something from God. In essence Barth says this about vocation or call- he says call is not primarily about our work or our response to God. Vocation is not something we have to add to our laundry lists of things to do we already feel behind enough on. Rather, vocation, call is this: "an unlimited readiness to see in the

aliens of today the brothers of tomorrow, and to love them as such.” (IV.3.2 p. 494) In English? We aren’t called first and foremost to work harder and get out there and win one for the old Gipper. We are called first and foremost to trust in God who created all the earth and to have the same hope for others God has for us. Provocatively, Barth says the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian isn’t works- like Christians are somehow nicer or better than others.² Ridiculous. No, the difference between Christians and non-Christians in his view is that we’re called to be and see a little differently. We’re called to trust there really is a God and this God really is love. And as such we are called primarily, to use his words again “to this unlimited readiness to see in the aliens of today the brothers of tomorrow, and to love them as such.”

So what happened with the boy and Inkosi Inkosikazi? Well, if the boy was hoping that the medicine man would put some kind of powerful curse on those Boers, bring lightning down from the sky or something, he was sorely mistaken. And if he was worried that the medicine man would ask him to work some great wonder and transform himself into a fierce, impressive, warrior- he was relieved. Inkosikazi stared the boy down with yellow, unearthly eyes. He called him to come forward- to stand before him. “You are the one with the nightwater problem?” he asked. The boy nodded. "Close your eyes," and the boy closed his eyes. And the medicine man said, "It is night. The moon of Africa is bright. You are standing on a ledge. Beneath you there are three waterfalls. The first one plunges into a pool; it sweeps over that pool, plunges into a second pool; it sweeps over that down and plunges into a lake. And on the lake there are ten black rocks leading to a beach of white sand. Do you see it?"

² See his notes on p. 565.

The boy nodded that he did see it, and the medicine man said, "Then hear it!" And there rushed through the boy the sound of water. There was water in his mind and water in his body and water in his heart. There was water on both sides of him. There was water underneath him, water above him. And in the thunder and crash of the water that was everywhere came the voice of Inkosi Inkosikazi, the medicine man, and it said to him, "You are a young warrior. You stand on the ledge above the waterfalls of the night. You have just killed your first lion. You wear a skirt of lion-tails. You are worthy to be in the honor guard of Shaka himself. Now here's what you must do, my little warrior. You must dive, and when you hit the first pool you will go to the bottom and you will count '3-2-1' on the way up and you will be swept over that pool. You will go to the second pool; you will go to the bottom. You will count '3-2-1' on the way up. You'll be swept over into the lake. You will jump on the first black rock and you will count '10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1' to the beach of white sand. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded that he did. The medicine man said, "Then, my little warrior, dive."

And in the imagination of his heart, the boy left the ledge. He hit the first pool, 3-2-1, swept over into the second pool, 3-2-1, swept over into the lake, 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1, until he lay exhausted on the beach of white sand, with the thunder and crash of the water inside him and outside him. And once again, the voice of the medicine man returned. It said, "You have crossed the nightwater. There is nothing more to be feared. If ever you need me, come to the ledge above the waterfalls of the night, and I will be there." Then the medicine man leaned down to the boy and said, "Open your eyes!"

The story continues in Bryce Courtenay's own voice, only now he is a man looking back on that time: "I went back to school. I never again wet my bed, but that didn't stop them. They were Boers; I was English. Night after night they'd drag me out, but they could never make me cry. And I knew this bothered them, for I knew they had little brothers who were six years old and they knew how easy it was to make a little six year old boy cry, but they could never make me cry. For when they tied the dirty strips of rags around my eyes I would take three deep breaths, and there I was on the ledge above the waterfalls of the night, the voice of Inkosi Inkosikazi in my ears. It said, "You are a young warrior. You have just killed your first lion. You wear a skirt of lion-tails. You are worthy to be in the honor guard of God himself." And it was then I knew that the outer me was a shell to be pushed and provoked, but inside was the real me, where my tears joined the tears of all the sad peoples of all the earth, to form the three waterfalls of the night."

You know every morning we gather to worship our liturgy begins with a call to worship. Now, this is a call for us to respond- for us to gather. But I hope after today you will also hear this call as a call to remember- one called to an unlimited openness to see in the aliens today the brothers of tomorrow, whether Boer, Muslim, or what have you. And my prayer is that we remember in this call who we are on the inside, children of God and nothing less, each of us chosen, each of us precious, all a royal priesthood, all called to worship and proclaim the mighty acts of the God who brings all the world from darkness to light. **Amen.**

