

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once 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. 1 Peter 2:9-10 NIV

Self worth, self image; how important is it? More than you might think. To have a healthy good self image comes from what we feel about ourselves, and the feedback we get from others. Unfortunately it is much easier to get negative feedback than positive. Some years ago when I was teaching a high school Sunday school class, one of the exercises was to tape complaints about people, then after taping and discussing them, they were to tape positive things about the same people. The “negative” comments far outweighed the “positive”. In fact at one point in the “positive” comments there was absolute silence.

Where negativity can really hurt is when those closest to us, probably without bad intentions on their part, make a comment or speak to us in such a way that it can cripple our self image for a very long time. I remember reading of such a situation. The family member made a particularly hurtful comment about someone when they were a child. That comment hobbled them emotionally for a very long time. Finally at a family celebration the conversation turned to that comment. The one who made the comment was shocked, and said “that’s not what I meant at all”. Still the damage was done.

Early Christians had a “self-image” problem too. For the most part they were from the poorer segments of society. They had given up the official state religion to worship what looked like to others as bizarre, worshipping a “crucified god”. So they were not only subject persecution but also ridicule. If you were from the poorer segment of society, with a poor self image to begin with, how would this make you feel?

Peter, in the letter that the above scripture verses were taken was keenly aware of their plight. So he lets them know what God thinks of them to encourage their faith. Confessing Christ and belonging to God puts them on the highest status. It is also interesting in scripture that when Jesus encounters folk of low self-image and societal importance he encourages them.

“God so loved the world...” begins a very familiar scripture verse from the gospel of John. There are times we should substitute our own name when we feel discouraged about ourselves. Martin Luther’s view of himself changed when realized his salvation was not how good he was but rather God’s acceptance of him through Jesus Christ.

But there is another part we can play. Can we communicate God’s encouragement to others? Peter obviously does that to these new Christians. The apostle Paul would have never been accepted as a brother in Christ among the apostles if Barnabas had not stepped in.

Is there a good word you can say today to someone you know? Say it, it might be life changing. Are you discouraged about yourself? Read John 3:16 and substitute your name for “the world”. Read the two verses at the top out loud. RIGHT NOW!!

St. Augustine once said “God loves us as if there were only one of us”. May we communicate that to others as well as to ourselves.

Pr. John Van Haneghan

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Acts 2:42 NIV

We live in “individualistic” times. Modern society really helps that along. We are able to travel in our cars and not have to be with a group of people on some sort of mass transit on a regular basis. Television can occupy our time for entertainment, and with High Definition sets, and now the advent of 3-D televisions, why would you want to fight crowds at a sports or entertainment function? Nintendo’s “wi” can get you competitive as well as a bit of exercise in your own home. Online shopping, banking, even degree programs can forgo any outside contact.

But there is one place where “individualism” cannot be the ruling factor, and that is in the nurture and character of the Christian faith. If you look in the book of Acts, in the afterglow in the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, those who were converted that day did not just go home and congratulate themselves, but they banded together as a new community. The scripture up above is later on in that same chapter after 3,000 people responded positively to Peter’s simple but powerful Pentecostal sermon.

Today we would call that gathering the church. One wonders if those early Christians would recognize the church of today. But the same functions should and do exist for the church today teaching (in the form of the Sermon, and opportunities for Christian Education), fellowship (from the basic act of gathering in worship to church dinners), breaking of bread (celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion), and prayer (prayers in worship, prayer chains, any church activity that begins with prayer).

So being part of a church should be essential for every believer, right? Unfortunately for many it is not so in these times. Part of the reason is that the church on earth is not or ever has been a perfect institution. Another part of the reason is that instead of the church continually stressing that it is a gathering sinners saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, church members either consciously or unconsciously put themselves on a pedestal of perfection that even the apostles couldn’t live up to. Not only does the “pedestal” discourage “seekers”, it discourages church members who routinely “drop out” because they fell off that pedestal.

Sometimes there is an unintentional “rigidity” that turns folk off. Sometimes patterns and times of church worship, fellowship, and nurture get stuck, and fail to factor in changes in the day to day living of folks of a new generation.

Yet even with these challenges listed above, we cannot grow in the fullness of our faith as children of God through faith in Jesus Christ without being part of a community of believers, that which we call the church. The Bible makes it clear that this was in the fabric of the earliest believers in Christ.

So what should we do? First of all be part of a fellowship of believers, and early and often acknowledge the only “perfect” person is the head of the church, Jesus Christ. Secondly participate with the view of growing in your relationship with God as the early believers did. Such participation has its risks involved for sure; you might not do something right, you might hear something that you don’t want to hear, you might feel you have to change something about yourself you’re uncomfortable changing.

Finally pray for the church that it might be all it can be as the representative of Christ on this earth.

Pr. John Van Haneghan