

Well, Aren't You Special!

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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1 Peter 2:2–10

How does it feel to receive a compliment?

It feels good, right? Because it's nice to be complimented. Compliments make us feel valued, validated, significant. In a way, we all like compliments, and, in a way, we all need them.

Mothers know this. Good mothers offer fitting and appropriate compliments to their children, praising them for their efforts, not too much, just enough. Good mothers also teach their children about compliments. They teach them how to accept a compliment with grace and without arrogance. And they teach them not to be so dependent on compliments, because the world is not so loving as a good mother.

But receiving a compliment, that may also feel ... weird. There's a natural reaction of uncertainty, almost embarrassment, that many have to compliments.

We shrink from the spotlight.

We question whether we deserve it.

We feel it's no big deal, anyone could have done it.

Sure, for some, this is just false modesty. We feel good about what we have done, and we want others to be pleased. We pretend to blush from the compliment as a strategy for encouraging the expressions of praise to continue. We might be saying, "Aw, stop it," but really we're saying "Don't stop, keep it going."

But for others of us, so aware are we of our own faults, our flaws, our mistakes, our errors forced and unforced, that we are unable to accept compliments. Deep down (or maybe not so deep) we feel we're unworthy of them. When we receive a compliment, that sense of unworthiness may even lead us to question the judgment, perspective, or sincerity of the one giving the compliment.

"Is he out his mind?" we think.

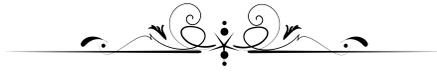
"Is she just blowing smoke?" we think.

And we fear that if others hear the compliment, they'll call us out for the frauds we know we are.

But there's another piece of the discomfort with compliments. And it's the feeling that the compliment puts an obligation on us. Once we've been noticed as good at something, we might have to keep on *being* good at it! We'll be obligated to live up to our reputation! Where will it end?!

Compliments can let loose a tug-of-war of feelings. We like the compliment, and want it to continue. But there's also that whole range of other feelings from "Thank you?" to "Aw, shucks" to "Who me?" to "Oh, no" to "Not it!" — all of that making us uncomfortable with the spotlight of attention the compliment brings.

We both desire and fear being told that we're special, oh so special.



The Bible passage I just read has in it what seem to be several compliments. Without a doubt, they are kind words. I expect that the Christians who first heard these words heard them with that same mixture of gratitude and uncertainty experienced by most all who receive compliments.

“Thank you.”

“Aw, shucks.”

“Who, me?”

“Oh, no!”

“Not it!”

In these verses, they were told that they’re special, oh so special. “Aren’t you special?” In these verses, they were affirmed and built up.

I wonder if they wondered: “Are we really?” I wonder if they wondered, “Who, us?”

What are some of those kind words, those thoughtful affirmations, those (possible) compliments? What are the ways by which those Christians were described?

There are several:

living stones;
those who believe;
those who find Christ precious;

a chosen race;
a royal priesthood;
a holy nation;

God’s own people;
receivers of mercy.

Now, that’s a lot.

These Christians were special, oh so special, in all those special ways. And maybe that was hard for them to accept. Maybe they weren’t sure they were worthy of all this ...

... which of course is true! That’s the point. *Of course* they weren’t worthy. *Of course* they didn’t deserve the compliments directed their way. And yet, the compliments were true and accurate descriptions of who they were.

That’s what makes all these things not exactly compliments, not as we usually think of “compliments.” These Christians *were* all these things, they *were* special,

yet not because of anything they had done,
not because of any special skill they had on their own,
not because of their own achievements.

They were all these things — chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s own people — *because of Jesus*.

Because of Jesus, they were special.

Because of Jesus, they were holy.

Because of Jesus, they were called.

Because of him they were a people, God's people, having an identity bigger than themselves, joined to each other by something much higher and deeper and broader

than family
or neighborhood
or hobbies
or nation
or politics
or ethnicity

or any of the things they typically would use to make connections with others.

It was all because of Jesus:

the living stone,
precious in God's sight and their's,
the cornerstone of the holy temple into which they were being built.

That is why they were special. *He* is why they were special, oh so special.



But of course, as with any words that point out specialness, that are affirming, even complimentary, these words put an obligation on those who heard them. Because they *were* such people, they were supposed to *live* like such people. It's as if they were being told, "This is who you are; now step up and *be* who you are!" —

growing;
living;
believing;
worshiping;
called;
royal;
priestly;
holy;
people of God;
blessed by mercy.

As part of them being all these things, they were called to live in certain ways. They are told, in these verses, that as people of God certain behaviors were expected from them.

"Long for the pure, spiritual milk...."

"Come to him, [Jesus,] a living stone, ... and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house."

"... be a royal priesthood."

"... offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

And just as they *were* these things because of Jesus, so too they could *be* these things,

act in these ways,
do such deeds,
show such behavior,

because of Jesus. They had a responsibility to live and love like Jesus (as my colleague and friend Tom DeVries likes to say). But they weren't on their own to rise to this, their responsibility.

They could be holy, because they were joined to Jesus, and Jesus is holy.

They could be priests, because they were joined to Jesus, and Jesus is the great high priest, eternally making intercession for them with God the Father.

They could be special, oh so special, because they were joined to Jesus, and Jesus, the absolutely unique and eternally reigning Son of God, is special beyond all measure,

altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful.¹



In case you hadn't noticed, in case it hadn't occurred to you, this is far and away more than what many people think the church is supposed to be, more than what many people think it means to be a Christian.

If someone thinks that church is a place to *go* rather than a Jesus-oriented community in which we are to *grow*, then most of this won't make sense.

If someone attends church solely for social interaction, then most of this won't make sense.

If someone expects always to be comforted and never to be challenged in and by church and among and by other Christians, then most of this won't make sense.

If someone thinks that Christian witness happens for one or two hours out of one day of the week, then most of this won't make sense.

If someone thinks that being a Christian means having a few good ideas about God and Jesus and love, then most of this won't make sense.

If someone thinks that the Christian life is mostly shown over against the ideas we dismiss and the behaviors we reject and the people we fear, then most of this won't make sense.

But this is really what the church should look like, and be. This is what we who identify as Christians should look like, and be.

All those things said to those Christians from very long ago are said also to us.

We, too,

are living stones,
those who believe,
those who find Christ precious,

a chosen race,
a royal priesthood,
a holy nation,

God's own people,
receivers of mercy.

¹from the song "Here I Am to Worship" by Chris Tomlin.

We, too,
are unworthy and undeserving,
yet by Jesus Christ *made* worthy and deserving.

We, too, are all these things (chosen, holy, priestly, God's own people),
not because of anything we have done,
not because of any special skill we have on our own,
not because of our own achievements,

but simply, miraculously, graciously, because of Jesus.

We, too, have an obligation to live up to and into our calling as people of Christ,
to grow in Christ,
to be alive in Christ,
to deepen our faith in Christ,
to engage our whole selves in worship offered through Christ and to Christ,
who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is to be glorified forever;
to live as those who are called,
to celebrate and share in Christ's reign over all powers,
to bless others by pointing the way to God,
to be holy and pure in all we say and do,
to be the people of God we really are,
blessed by God's mercy.

We, too, may and must
long for the pure, spiritual milk;
come to Jesus and find our home in him;
be built into a spiritual house;
be a royal priesthood;
through Jesus offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

We, too, *can* be all this,
not on our own strength,
or by our own talent,
or through our own goodness,
or with our own spirituality,

but rather in and with and by Jesus Christ.



My friends, this is who you are. Now step up and *be* who you are:

growing;
living;
believing;
worshiping;
called;
royal;
priestly;
holy;
people of God;
blessed by mercy.

My friends, aren't you special!
In Jesus Christ, indeed you are.