

“Once You Were Not a People” / I Peter 2:4-10 / 18 May 2014

Oh, the writer of First Peter is laying it on thick in this ancient letter. He's calling his humble readers by a whole host of flattering titles. “You're a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation! Once you were no people, but now you are God's own people.” I imagine the readers glancing at each other awkwardly. “A royal what? Did the postman give us someone else's mail again?” They don't feel holy or chosen. They don't feel like God's own. But they are. Ah, knowing ourselves can be so hard. The world will happily tell us who we are. And we spend years constructing our own identities. But love calls us as love sees us, simply as God's own.

Back in July of 2011, His Imperial and Royal Highness Archduke Otto von Hapsburg died at the age of 98. Now, I don't claim to understand how European royal dynasties work. I'm still not exactly sure how it is that *Queen* Elizabeth is married to *Prince* Philip. Why not *King* Philip? But in any case, the archduke was somehow the last crown prince of an empire that disappeared from the globe in 1918, the Austria-Hungarian Empire. He was a remarkable fellow, by all accounts. The archduke authored forty books about political theory, and he published in four European languages with no help from any translator. Although he spent almost a decade hiding out from the Nazis, ironically, he died a citizen of Germany. In any case, upon the occasion of his burial, the people of Austria rallied all their pomp and ceremony and pretended to be a powerful empire once again, if only for a few days. The last crown prince had to be buried according the funeral rites of the ancient Hapsburg Family.

Since time immemorial, the Hapsburgs have been buried in the crypt of a certain monastery in Vienna, and they've all been buried in the exact same way. After an elaborate funeral mass at the cathedral, the burial procession arrives at the doors of the monastery, and the Grand Chamberlain pounds on the church door three times with a silver cane. A Capuchin monk inside the abbey asks, “Who is there?” Speaking on the dead man's behalf, the chamberlain replies, “I am His Imperial and Royal Highness the Emperor of Austria, Apostolic King of Hungary, King of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, and King of Jerusalem, Archduke of Austria, Grand Duke of Tuscany and Cracow, Duke of Lorraine, Salzburg, Grand Prince of Transylvania,” And the list goes on and on with another two-dozen names of places that most of us have never heard of, places that no Hapsburg has ruled in well over one hundred years. It's an awe-inspiring list of credentials. “I am the Prince of Trent...Earl of Hohenems, Lord of Trieste,” and so on. The list is a study in central European place names, a catalog of all the cities and provinces that the Hapsburgs, in their great power, had at one time conquered or collected, all the places that owed homage to the dead archduke. And when at last the man knocking on the door runs out of lofty titles for the deceased, he falls silent, expecting to be granted entrance for such a distinguished personage. But on the inside of the locked gate, the monk replied, “Go away, we do not know you.”

Again, the chamberlain knocks at the door with his silver cane, and again the monk demands to know who's there. This time, the chamberlain simply says, on behalf of the dead man, “I'm Otto von Hapsburg, his majesty the emperor and king.” And again the monk replies, “Go away, we do not know you.” Finally, the chamberlain knocks a third time, and again the monk asks who's there. It's beginning to feel like a tedious knock-knock joke. But this time the chamberlain replies, “I am Otto, a poor mortal and a sinner.” This time the monk says, “Come in.” The doors to the monastery swing open, and the casket is taken for burial to the family crypt.

This is a true and beautiful story that illustrates a fact: On that day when we return to the earth from which we're all formed, our titles will mean nothing. Achievements, degrees, money, power, intelligence—these things are of no importance once death has claimed us. And yet, though all our pomp and all our self-appointed identities fall away, still the names that we never even claimed for ourselves remain: a mortal, a sinner, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

Now the recipients of this letter of First Peter know that there's nothing royal about them. They know that they're just dirt farmers on the edge of the Roman Empire. But the writer isn't trying to flatter them. When the writer of First Peter calls his readers “royal, chosen, holy, God's own,” he's

speaking to them in a sort of love language. He's like the man who tells his average-looking, middle-aged, perhaps slightly overweight wife with the crow's feet and the many sags, "You're the most beautiful woman in the world." Is it verifiably true? If he were to take a scientific poll to see if people actually found his wife more beautiful than Charlize Theron, would the majority of people agree? Of course not. It's not about that. But love cannot see with dispassionate eyes. No love is perfectly rational; all love is crazy; it's the only kind you get. And so, when the man tells his average-looking wife that she's the most beautiful woman in the world, she may not even see kit herself, but it's not about public opinion or conventional forms of beauty. It's about the fact that she is his own, and he wouldn't trade her for Angelina Jolie. It's about the fact that he's seen her grow old beside him, dreaming their dreams together, laughing, and crying, and surviving hardships together. It's about the fact that apart from her, he doesn't even know who he is himself. It's about years of laughter, and tears, and spats, and boredom, and forgiveness. It's not about objective beauty, but another beauty far, far deeper than the world can see, a beauty that even the beloved cannot see, but which is only seen by the one who loves her.

This world tells us to distinguish ourselves, to be the richest, or the smartest, or if religion is our thing then be the holiest. But this world can never see us as the One who loves us sees. We forever try to invent ourselves in keeping with the world's demands, or perhaps in defiance of them. Each time we engage in any kind of social interaction, we're projecting some image of ourselves out into the world. And we're fragmented into so many part-selves, our work selves, our club selves, our online selves, home selves, church selves. And in all of these domains, there are things we want the world to believe about us. Whether on FaceBook, or our answering machine, or in our daily conversation, we are forever projecting some image of who-we-want-the-world-to-believe-we-are. It's exhausting. What if we could just be? Wouldn't life be easier if you could live securely in the knowledge that "*you* are chosen, beloved, God's own"?

This is where it would be easy to say that you're as special as a snowflake landing on a unicorn's nose. But that's not what I'm saying. I'm simply saying that it's hard to see ourselves as we truly are. We usually accept the shallow roles that the world assigns us, or else we try to invent ourselves daily. Neither thing works, and it's hard to know who we are. But we have a holy identity that we can claim when—like Otto von Hapsburg at the church door—all our best attempts at human grandeur fail, when accomplishments, and titles, and the glories of this world fall short. Still, in God's eyes, "You are a royal priesthood, chosen and beloved." The world around you may not see it. I may not always see it. Lord knows you probably don't see it yourself, but you were perfectly crafted to be a solution to part of this world's brokenness, the salve for a bit of its pain. New elders and deacons: you're chosen, beloved...forgiven. Confirmands, joining the church today: you're royal, God's own. You don't have to prove it. You don't have to earn it. You just accept it...then gout out there into the world and live as if you know who you are. Amen.