

The Mercy or the Queen Mary?
Psalm 96:1-3 and 1 Peter 2:4-10
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Psalm 96:1-3 (NRSV)

O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

1 Peter 2:4-10 (NRSV)

Come to [Jesus], 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. 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.”

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,” 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.

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.

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.

I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Pastors do not always see eye to eye with everyone in the congregations where they serve. I know that's hard to believe. Here's another secret. Pastors do not want the people they don't see

eye to eye with to be the chair of the personnel committee. Take it from me! That's what happened when I served a church in central IL.

I'll call him William. William was a beloved child of God who never came into worship. He would move around outside of the sanctuary, and make sure that any visitors coming in late would feel welcome. He did, however, make sure that he knew how many people came to worship, because every month at the personnel meeting, he would ask me to leave, and then with great fanfare he would present the monthly attendance charts, so the committee could see how things compared to the previous month and year.

Here's the thing: I honestly believe that he did not care what I preached about. He never heard it anyway! I honestly believe we would not have cared if I preached nothing but sermons about how Jesus was not in any way, shape or form the Son of God. He would not have cared, that is, as long as more people had come than the previous week.

William had a laser focus on one measure of a church's success: its sustainability as an institution. Is it going to be around in the years to come? Is the attendance going to be higher next year? How sturdy is the building? Is there enough cash being deposited and enough pledges coming in each year? (You can call that the ABCs of sustainability—attendance, buildings, and cash). William cared deeply about whether the institution would be sustainable, year after year.

Meanwhile, I was trained up to care a lot more about whether the church, as a part of the body of Christ, was faithful to the good news of the Gospel. It's not that I didn't care whether the church was doing okay in terms of attendance, buildings, and cash—after all, I do have an MBA. It's just that I thought it was short-sighted to ONLY look at ABC, when there were so many other things to look at.

I wondered, for instance, if my sermons faithfully communicated the gospel. It matters a great deal to me if my sermons help people understand who Jesus is, in all of his fullness! Did worship give glory to God? Did the church do what

it could to help people of all ages grow in faith? Did people demonstrate caring relationships with one another? Were the people involved become involved in ministries with the least of these? There were so many questions in my mind about whether the church was faithful to the call of the Gospel as a part of the body of Christ.

So one way that William and I didn't see eye to eye is that if William were here, I think he'd say that these issues of faithfulness are too pie in the sky and not nearly as quantifiable as the questions about sustainability. I'd probably replay, "That may be true, but only faithfulness comes up in our New Testament passage for today."

In this passage, Peter calls the church so many things:

- Living stones
- A spiritual house
- A holy and royal priesthood
- Spiritual sacrifices
- God's own people

We could have a full length sermon on each of these titles and how they help us understand faithfulness, but Nancy tells me she has a meeting at 12:30. She's a killjoy, and she's also my supervisor, so we're just going to focus on a couple of these very briefly.

According to Peter, In God's eyes, we're a priesthood—a royal, holy priesthood. What do priests do? They help connect people to God. So when Peter says we're a royal priesthood, that means the church's purpose is to help connect people outside the church with God.

Then Peter says in God's eyes we are "spiritual sacrifices." Sacrifices are what we offer to God when we are fully ready to surrender ourselves to God's purposes to bless the whole world....when we are able to prioritize God's will and desires above all others.

Finally Peter says that in God's eyes we are these things "in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of God."

So to recap: The church is to help people outside the church to connect with God; we surrender ourselves to bless the whole world; and we proclaim the mighty acts of God.

That sounds an awful lot like the body of Christ seeking to make disciples, and not the institutional church seeking to find new members in order to make sure we will be around next year.

Which brings us back to my nemesis, William. William was laser-focused on sustainability, and he had all the charts and bells and whistles to prove it. He'd wonder how in the world we'd be able to put whether or not we were faithful on a chart.

I think one way to check how faithful we are is to think about which boat we are more similar to: the Mercy or the Queen Mary.

The Queen Mary 2 is one of the most luxurious cruise ships in the world. Have any of you been on it? The most expensive cabin has two floors, his and hers bathrooms, a private gym, and a deck...it's about 2500 square feet, which is about two and a half times as big as my apartment in Evanston. Not that I'm counting.

Unlike my apartment, it comes with 1250 staff, all dedicated to make sure that you and all of the other patrons on the ship have the best time of your life. Imagine—1250 staffers all focused on you—along with every other luxury you can imagine. If you can afford it, it's hard to imagine why you would ever get off.

That's the Queen Mary 2. The Mercy is a United States Navy Hospital Ship that is used for humanitarian missions. It's the length of three football fields and the height of a ten story building. It went to Manhattan to provide medical

and mental health services after 9/11. It headed to the gulf coast after Katrina in 2005, and to Haiti following the massive earthquake in 2010.

There are 1250 staffers on the Mercy too. But they have a completely different role. They're not trying to make sure the people on the boat have every luxury they need. They are trying to take care of others off the boat. They're focusing on the people outside of them. They're all involved, with a clear motivating purpose: to reach out to the folks outside of them.

So I ask again...what kind of boat are we on, as a church? Are we more like the Queen Mary 2, or the USNS Mercy?

There are some churches which are definitely more like the Queen Mary. They think if they could just provide all the right services, then members would never want to leave. If they could just have all the right styles of worship, all the right kinds of Bible studies, all the right possibilities for service, all the right youth and children's ministries. If their services could just be as good as the Queen Mary's, then no one would ever want to leave.

And oh yeah, if they could just get the staff to do all this ministry, and do it all directed toward them. They may not need 1250 staff, but they need the staff to do most of the ministry for them. And not just for them, so that they don't have to get their hands dirty...but also directed toward them, so that none of them are very focused toward people outside of the church, but rather are just looking inwardly at the members' needs and desires.

The kind of people who like to be on the Queen Mary are the kind of people who like to consume church. They want to have other produce church and give it to them. So other people, like the staff, produce the worship services, and service projects, and ministry opportunities, which the folks on the Queen Mary decide whether they want to take part in or not.

The author Anthony B Robinson, in his book *Changing the Conversation*, would say churches that feel like the Queen Mary have a culture of membership. Queen Mary churches turn inwardly and worry mostly about

whether members are being taken care of, whether members are being served well by the staff, and whether members are supporting the institution with their presence and their money.

The PNC Study Group has been studying this book closely, and 70 others throughout the congregation have signed up to take a deep dive into the book alongside them. I think one of the reasons it's been so valuable is because Robinson contrasts the Queen Mary culture-of-membership churches with the US Naval Ship the Mercy culture-of-discipleship Churches. Everyone on board works together well—they probably have a good time together—but no one is confused by the purpose of why they are there.

In these culture-of-discipleship churches, they are less interested in how long someone has been a member, and more interested in how it has been going lately for each person involved at the church as a follower of Christ.

In Mercy churches everyone in the church is responsible for the mission, vitality, and ministry of the church, not just the staff. When there's a problem, members join together with the staff to resolve it. When there's a celebration, the membership is just as involved in the ministry decisions which led to the good news as the staff. The body of Christ together jointly guides the church, as disciples.

At a Mercy Church, the members of the church aren't consumers of church, they're producers of church—the ministry belongs to them, not the staff. Church isn't confined to the four walls of the church building—it's happening all around the community and the world.

So what kind of church do you want First Church to be? Do you want us to be a Mercy Church, or a Queen Mary Church? To have a culture of discipleship, or of membership?

Does the Mercy Church or the Queen Mary church look more like the church that Peter talked about?

- Living stones
- A spiritual house
- A holy and royal priesthood
- Spiritual sacrifices
- God's own people

In God's eyes, is the Mercy Church or the Queen Mary Church the most faithful kind of church to be?