

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 24, 2011

Deuteronomy 7:6-9 "Set Apart for God's Service"

I remember when I was graduating from college that a representative of a china company visited the campus near the end of the school year and was selling formal china place settings to students. I don't think I even knew what formal china was at that time. We didn't have it growing up. We used some red and white Johnson's Brothers place-settings for every day eating, but most of the plates and bowls had been chipped or broken over the years. We did have some inexpensive white plates that we later used for occasional dinners on Thanksgiving or Christmas, but they weren't anything special. However, these were our special plates, and they were set apart for special occasions.

Today at our house we have our everyday china, but we also have some china that is set apart for special occasions. We don't run the plates through the dishwasher like we do the everyday china, and it also has to be a very special occasion for us to use the special china. This china is set apart to be used for something special.

In the Old Testament reading today, we learn that God has set apart something special. God says that you are set apart for his special purpose. You are set apart to be holy to the Lord.

When something was declared holy for the people of Israel in the Old Testament, it meant that it was set apart for a special purpose. For example, when the priests were consecrated for their service in the tabernacle or the temple, they were dedicated for their service on behalf of the people, and before God, in order to offer sacrifices and to care for the sacramental vessels. They were declared holy for this purpose. They were not declared holy because they were considered better than other people in their obedience to God's commandments. Instead, they were declared holy because God had chosen them, even set them apart, to serve him in the holy place on behalf of the nation of Israel.

Many other things were set apart as holy in the worship center. The bread that was baked and presented before God in the tabernacle each day was considered holy, and it could only be eaten by the priests and their families after fresh, hot bread was put in its place. Also, the clothing that the priests wore for their service was specially dedicated and worn only in service before the Lord, and not worn as street clothing. Additionally, the first born of the clean animals were set apart as belonging to God and were to be sacrificed to him on the altar. All these things were set apart, or holy.

God set you apart to be holy to the Lord. While we often associate the word "holy" with "obedience," actually it is not our obedience that makes us holy before God. Rather, it is God who makes us, or declares us holy before him. God makes us holy when our faith believes that Jesus died at the cross for our sins in order to bring us to God. Faith in Jesus' life, death and resurrection for our forgiveness and salvation bestows holiness on people. God declares you holy, or set apart, for the Lord's work.

You are also chosen by God to be his treasured possession. He wants you to come to him in heaven and eternal life when you leave this world, and he made it possible through Jesus Christ, but he also enjoys a personal relationship with you now in this lifetime. God purchased you with the blood of his own beloved Son which was shed on the cross. Christ gave his life at the cross to reconcile you to God in peace. His death and his resurrection bring you into a special relationship with God that is based on the

forgiveness of sins. You are now God's own treasured possession. Therefore, God relishes the time he spends with you when you come to him in prayer, worship, and study of his Word. God gave you these things to know and love him better. You are his treasured possession.

God's reason for choosing people for himself has nothing to do with there being something in them that is better than in someone else. It all has to do with grace, or his undeserved favor. For example, when God chose Abraham to be the father of a great nation, he could just as well have chosen someone else. However, God chose Abraham to be the beginning of a line that would lead to the Messiah. Similarly, there was nothing extraordinary about Israel when he brought them out of slavery and Egypt to the Promised Land, thus choosing them to be his special people. Rather, it was God's undeserved favor that God chose Israel, as part of his continuing plan to send the Messiah and fulfill his promise to Abraham.

So there is nothing in Christians that makes them better than anyone else in the world. All people in the world are sinners before God who deserve only his wrath. All people enter this life enslaved to the sinful nature within them, and they are guilty before God. All people from the time of Adam and Eve's fall into sin enter life condemned before God because of their sin, and thus they are unholy before God.

Only God can set apart unholy people for a holy purpose, and God does this only through Jesus Christ. Just as God once delivered the people of Israel from slavery to the Egyptians, so God sets us free from slavery to sin through Jesus Christ. God remembered the promise he made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their descendants would be his special people, and so he delivered the people from slavery and led them to the Promised Land. And when Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross into death, it fulfilled the promise to our spiritual ancestors that a great people, or church, would be formed through the Messiah, Jesus our Lord. God loves you, and he frees us from slavery to sin through Jesus Christ.

You are set apart, chosen, holy, and freed from the power of the sinful nature. God has done this through Jesus Christ, and God promises that at the end of your life he will bring you to himself in heaven. You can trust God's promise because God has always kept his promises to his people from the beginning of time. Jesus Christ was the culmination of God's promises in the Old Testament, and Jesus fulfilled all the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah. And because Christ has come to save us through the cross, there is nothing that can get in the way of our eternal salvation. God always keeps his promises, and so you can always trust God to be faithful to you. The Romans reading today states this very clearly:

"If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

And the reading ends by saying this:

³⁸"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Your relationship to God is secure through the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of God's promise to save people from the sin that separates people from God. He made a bridge that leads us to heaven and eternal life. That bridge is the person of his own Son, Jesus Christ – once crucified, but now raised from the dead and at God's right hand.

You are set apart as holy to God. It is not because there is anything special in you or me; rather it is because of God's grace. God's love for you, clearly seen in Jesus Christ, stands as a constant reminder that you are dearly loved by God, forgiven, chosen, and set apart to spend eternity with God from today until forever.

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