

**EVERYONE IS PRECIOUS IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST**

In 1957, some Buddhist monks in THAILAND had to relocate a large clay STATUE of the Buddha, because a HIGHWAY was being built directly through their TEMPLE. Well, when a crane began LIFTING up the statue, a loud CRACK was heard. At the SAME time, it began RAINING. SO, the head monk, afraid that the Buddha would be permanently DAMAGED, asked that the statue be lowered to the ground and covered with a TARP. Later that evening, he went out to see if the Buddha was staying DRY. And WHEN he lifted the tarp and his flashlight hit the Buddha, his eye caught a slight glimmer. Curious, he got himself a hammer and chisel, and began tapping away on the clay. Well, WHAT he discovered, after HOURS of very delicate work, was that UNDERNEATH the clay, there was a Buddha made of SOLID gold. It stood 10 & 1/2 feet tall and weighed 2 & 1/2 TONS! AFTER doing some research about it, the monk discovered that, CENTURIES earlier, when SIAM, as it was called then, was under siege by an enemy ARMY, the ancient MONKS had covered their GOLD Buddha with CLAY, so that it would not be destroyed or plundered. Well, all the monks were then MURDERED, so NO ONE discovered their SECRET until THIS monk SEARCHED their ancient WRITINGS. And NOW, here it WAS: a solid gold Buddha, HIDDEN under the CLAY.

Well, that's a great story, isn't it? And to ME, it's SYMBOLIC of the MESSAGE that we find in the GOSPELS! THAT'S the message of JESUS about US! EACH and every one of US is like that golden Buddha, in the sense that, WITHIN each of us is the gleaming IMAGE of GOD. WITHIN each of us is a golden SEED, a golden ESSENCE, which is ETERNAL and INDESTRUCTIBLE. WITHIN each of us is a beauty and value of INESTIMABLE worth. HOWEVER, over the years of our lives, the CLAY and the DUST and the MUCK of life has LAYERED us with DISGUISES, HIDDEN our LIGHT, and TARNISHED our BEAUTY. For SOME of us, the CLAY that hides our GOLD is childhood messages of judgment, shame and inadequacy, or WORSE, experiences of being ABUSED or VIOLATED. For OTHERS of us, it's the stress and brutality of the CORPORATE world that has tarnished the SHINE of our self-worth. For SOME of us, the anonymity of government bureaucracy has obscured our ambition, creativity and initiative. And for OTHERS of us, it's TRUST broken and RELATIONSHIPS failed, shattered dreams or physical pain. But it has BURIED that spark of God WITHIN us. Yes, ALL of us have CLAY hiding the GOLD within.

Well, IN our scripture lesson today from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, an unnamed disciple is writing to a FLEDGLING group of GENTILE Christians somewhere in Asia Minor (or present-day Turkey), about 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And sociologists have determined that THESE Christians in Asia Minor were OUTSIDERS in the community where they lived. They were foreigners and aliens, manual laborers and the poor. They were THOSE whom the POWERFUL of society USED in order to maintain the STATUS QUO. And AS a religious MINORITY, they were RIDICULED and HARASSED by the MAJORITY. YET, it is to THESE people, people who receive LITTLE affirmation from the WORLD, that the ultimate affirmation of GOD is GIVEN. LISTEN to what is SAID to them: ***YOU are holy! YOU are precious! YOU are chosen! YOU are called! YOU are, in the eyes of God, IMPORTANT, significant, and necessary people! And it is through the Christ IN you that YOU have become the building blocks of the NEW creation!***

WOW....! But, that's not ALL! Listen to THIS: the voice of God goes even ONE step further! Not only are these people given VALUE and WORTH; but they are ALSO given a PLACE: a place to BELONG, a place to feel SAFE, a place to be NURTURED, and a place to GROW and become WHOLE. You see: these HOMELESS people are given a HOME! **THEY are *oikos deos*! THEY are the *HOUSEHOLD of God*, the CHRISTIAN community, a PLACE where identity and ACCEPTANCE are found! And it's BEAUTIFUL!**

Well friends, the HOME that is given to THEM is ALSO given to US. And IN *oikos deos*, the household of God, strangers and friends are MORE than welcome. ALL of us are invited to come IN and JOIN in the household RITUALS of bathing and eating, of baptism and communion. For it is THROUGH the sacrament of BAPTISM that we are incorporated into CHRIST, and THROUGH the sacrament of COMMUNION that CHRIST is incorporated into US. And what is so POWERFUL about God's gift of grace and worth is that once WE have found out home within the household of God, then WE can become a HOME for the HOMELESS of the world. Once WE have come to Jesus Christ, the living stone, chosen and precious in God's sight, then we TOO are called to be LIVING stones, stones built into a spiritual HOUSE to provide refuge for strangers and aliens in the world around us. Therefore, AS the CHURCH of Jesus Christ, **WE**

become HOME for the widow and the alcoholic. **WE** become HOME for the TEENAGER rejected by her peers, AND the GAY man alienated from his FAMILY. **WE** become HOME for the WIFE trapped in a stagnant marriage, the child who is disabled, and the young adult who is mentally challenged. **WE** become HOME for the unwed mother who NEEDS a family for her children, AND the BUSINESS executive who has just been DOWNSIZED out of a future. **WE** become HOME for the wealthy LAWYER whose SOUL feels impoverished, AND the brilliant SCIENTIST whose HEART feels COLD. **WE** become HOME for the single adult who feels ignored, AND for the AGED person who feels IRRELEVANT. **WE** become HOME for the woman who LOSES control, AND the MAN who ABUSES control. AND, if our GRATITUDE gives us enough COURAGE, we EVEN become HOME for the TRULY homeless of this world, those who LIVE on the streets, and maybe SMELL badly, or TALK funny, or make NO sense at ALL.

Yes, friends, the church of Jesus Christ is *oikos deos*, the *HOUSEHOLD of God*! It is HOME for the walking WOUNDED of this world, including YOU and ME! At the SAME time, as the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter says, it is a *HOLY nation, a ROYAL priesthood, the CHOSEN people of God*. I'm telling you, friends: if EVER there was a *rags-to-riches* story, the CHURCH of Jesus Christ is IT! And WE are, at THIS time in history, the LEAD characters in that drama. Yes, friends, WE are the valuable, lovely, PRECIOUS people, who have been given a permanent HOME in the HEART of God! And you know: THAT makes us a pretty EXCLUSIVE community! And I DON'T mean EXCLUSIVE in the sense that we SHUT people OUT! NO! In fact, it's just the opposite: WE are EXCLUSIVE because WE welcome EVERYBODY in! And we are EXCLUSIVE because of the distinctive VALUES that SHAPE our lives, values like unconditional LOVE and extravagant WELCOME, generous ACCCEPTANCE and eager TOLERANCE! Yes friends, THESE are the values that SHAPE, or OUGHT to shape, the CHURCH of Jesus Christ (though they DON'T shape EVERY church). AND, THESE are values that encourage us to LOOK for that precious GOLD that lies HIDDEN beneath the common CLAY of each and every person we meet, and each ONE who walks THROUGH our DOORS.

A colleague of mine, Susan Andrews, tells it THIS way: *at a recent family retreat in our church, we played a WONDERFUL game of softball. But this game was of a MUTANT variety. The softball was almost as big as a volleyball, and there was an ODD assortment of BATS. The YOUNGEST player was 5, and the OLDEST 65. EVERYONE was welcomed and wanted, fat or skinny, slow or fast, successful or not, and everyone got as many PITCHES as they NEEDED in order to HIT the ball.... One little boy hit the ball about two feet, and could EASILY have been thrown out at FIRST, except the catcher (quote) "accidentally" FUMBLEd the ball and didn't THROW it in time. THEN, it was SARAH'S turn. Because of a GENETIC disorder, Sarah's BRAIN doesn't always connect with the ACTION needed. When it was her turn to bat, her father helped her swing, and when the hit came, she started running in the WRONG direction. But, what happened NEXT was amazing! As a single organism, EVERY person on the field swung into action. They called OUT to her, they HELPED her, and they ALL did what they could to get her to first base. And then, WHEN she went straight from second base to home, NO one corrected her. Instead, we all CHEERED for the RUN that she had scored. The man NEXT to me said softly: It really DOES take a VILLAGE to raise a child. And I stood there with TEARS in my eyes as Sarah basked in the affection of the crowd. On that ball field, we had BECOME the body of Christ, an alternative community with distinctive values, the values of LOVE, grace and tolerance, which declared to the world that EACH child of God is PRECIOUS, and GOLD at the core.*

It's like the *Peanuts* cartoon I once saw. It showed Linus talking to Lucy with JOY spread across his face. And the caption read: *This morning in Sunday School we were singing Jesus Loves Me when all of a sudden it hit me: Jesus loves ME... ME... completely worthless ol' ME!*

Well friends, THANKS be to God for ALL the very PRECIOUS people sitting in our sanctuary TODAY, and ALL those listening on the radio too! **AND**, thanks be to God for ALL the precious people out there in the world, the ones whom God is calling each of US to LOVE and SERVE. MAY we, indeed, offer our LIVES to fulfill this very IMPORTANT calling, to be *oikos deos*, to be the *HOUSEHOLD of God*, that we might also BE that ROYAL priesthood, that HOLY nation, that CHOSEN people, whom God CALLS us to BE. Friends, IN the church of Jesus Christ, **EVERYONE** is PRECIOUS, and OUR job is to help them FEEL that way. That's YOUR job, and that's MY job. SO, let's all WORK at it, and DO it! Amen.