



Doing Good vs. Doing Well

TEXT
1 Peter 2:1–10

November 4, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

The Reformed Church of Hungary is one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in the world. They trace their beginnings to the 15th century nearly 100 years before the Protestant Reformations in Germany and Switzerland. They were proudly hosting an international gathering of all Presbyterian churches, and I had taken a delegation of students from Columbia Seminary to the city of Debrecen, the birthplace of the church in Hungary, for the meeting.

On the way between Budapest and Debrecen, we toured towns and villages where Presbyterian congregations hosted us. In one town, the church invited us to tour a residential school for children with disabilities. We piled into a van and drove to the outskirts of the town. There we saw a building that had clearly seen better days. We met the principal and the local church pastor at the entrance.

When we walked into the building, it was obvious that it was overcrowded. There were too many children and too few adults. But it was clear to me that the principal was proud of the school. Our interpreter explained to us that this school was totally funded by the regional Presby-

terian churches and was far better than any of the state schools. The principal told us that many of these children had been abandoned by parents who could not or would not care for them.

As soon as we left the principal's office and walked into the hallways of the school, we were surrounded by beautiful children. They ran up to us and hugged us and reached out and took our hands. Several of my students lifted some of the smaller ones up and were carrying them as they giggled and laughed. The principal then continued the tour and took us into another part of the school that housed children with more severe and profound disabilities.

We turned a corner and walked into a large open room, and I caught my breath. Around the perimeter of the room there were children, and each child was in a cage. The principal saw my reaction, and she explained quickly that this was for the children's safety. They did not have enough staff people, and these children could not control their bodies, and they would fall out of the beds if they were not in these cages. She said they were doing their best. I believe that to be true. But these were children. And they were in cages.

She tried to hurry us out of the room, but I told her I would like to stay, and she could take the rest of my students and finish the tour. I assured her I would catch up to them. A teacher stayed in the room with me and was trying to talk with me, but my Hungarian was so limited. I tried to assure her that I was fine. I just wanted to visit each child. So with her by my side, I went around to each child and knelt down and reached through the bars and tried to touch them, to stroke their beautiful hair, to hold a hand or limb. And I recited the only words that came to my heart in that moment. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. God's own child," I spoke to each one. I believe that to be true.

The Apostle Peter is writing to the young church. This second chapter of his first letter is about two things: identity and purpose. He begins by reminding them that as followers of Jesus Christ, they are to get rid of malice and guile, insincerity, envy and all slander. In her fine commentary, Professor Catherine Gonzalez puts it this way. She says, "Christians are to stop having anger in their hearts about others and scheming to hurt them, to not be

jealous and stop talking badly about others.”¹

Peter is trying to help these Christians understand that they are to turn to Jesus Christ. He likens Jesus to a cornerstone on a building that sets the pattern for how the rest of the building is to be constructed. You architects and engineers and contractors and builders know this. If the structure is to hold, the cornerstone must be set correctly. Peter says you, O Church, are just like that building. And our cornerstone is none other than Jesus Christ. He sets the pattern for our lives. And because he does, because we seek to follow him, this is our identity. This is us. By the grace of God, we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. That is our identity.

These past three Sundays, our Senior Pastor Tom Are has preached on three theological values that are the basis of our identity. These theological values form the foundation for us built on Christ the cornerstone. We are incarnational, meaning we embody Jesus Christ. We are relational, meaning we engage in holy friendship. And we are missional so that our faith engages the world, and we do not lose hope. That is our identity.

On this Commitment Sunday, this is our purpose. Did you hear it? *For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people for this purpose. In order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of God who has brought you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.*

That is our purpose.

Every spring in Atlanta at Emory University’s graduation, one senior is awarded the McMullan Prize. The McMullan Prize is chosen by a select committee of faculty for the senior student who demonstrates great academic achievement and great character. The recipient is a closely guarded secret and is announced during the graduation ceremonies. The winner of the prize receives a check for \$25,000, no strings attached. The prize winner is always mentioned in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, but just before I left Atlanta, the prize winner made the front page.

I thought it unusual that the news outlet would dedicate a part of the front page to the winner of the McMullan prize. There was story there and a picture of two young adults: Robbie Brown, the McMullan prize winner, and Elizabeth Sholtys, another graduating senior at Emory from Ithaca, New York. It turns out that Robbie and Elizabeth had met briefly the previous fall when they were in a van driving to the airport to meet some prospective students.

On the way to the airport, Liz, who had just returned from a year studying in Mumbai, told Robbie about a project she had just initiated. During her year of going to classes, Liz became friends with the street children who lived around the international student dormitory. Truth be told, Liz spent more time with the street children than she did studying.

That spring, when she returned to Ithaca, she asked her

parents and grandparents and friends that if they were planning to give her any money for her birthday or Christmas or even graduation, she would be grateful if they would give it to her now because she wanted to start a foundation to adopt some of the street children she had met in Mumbai. At any given time, the government of India estimates that there are over 37,000 children living on the streets there.

With the money she received, nearly \$5,000 dollars, she was able to purchase a flat in Mumbai and hire four women to live there and care for eight girls that she adopted. According to the state of Maharashtra, Elizabeth Sholtys is the mother of eight girls ages four through 10. She told Robbie all about this and even passed around brochures with pictures of the girls.

At commencement the following May, Robbie Brown was named the McMullan Prize winner to a standing ovation. He went up on the platform and received an engraved plaque with his name and an envelope with a check for \$25,000. He returned to his seat on the field. Then the graduates began to be called, and each one received their diploma. Robbie, being a Brown, went early. He was sitting there watching, and across the platform walked Elizabeth Marie Sholtys. Robbie remembered their conversation in the van the previous fall. After commencement was over, Robbie stood up and worked his way across the field to the section with people whose last name started with “S.” Eventually, he found Liz.

He tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned around, and he said, “Hey, I don’t know if you remember me.”

Liz interrupted, “Hey, you’re Robbie Brown! You just won the McMullan Award. Congratulations!” and she gave him a hug.

Then he said, “Yeah. Thanks. Hey, do you remember that we met last fall in the van ride to the airport?”

“Yes,” said Liz.

Then Robbie asked, “How is that foundation you started?”

“It’s going great,” Liz said. “I have applied for tons of grant money and have some really good prospects.”

“Cool,” said Robbie. “I have something for you.” And he gave her an envelope.

She was puzzled and said, “Thanks.” Then Robbie went back to his section.

Later, when Liz was in her dorm room changing her clothes to go to dinner with her family, she felt in her pocket the envelope that Robbie had given her. She had completely forgotten about it. She opened it. It was a check from Emory University made out to Robert Alan Brown for \$25,000. On the back of the check, he had endorsed it and wrote: “Make payable to the Elizabeth Sholtys Foundation.” Underneath that, he had written: “Get more kids.”

When word got out about what Robbie had done, it spread instantly on social media. Then Emory University heard about it and put out a press release. That is how the story got to the front page of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* five days later. Through

a friend who teaches at Emory, I was able to reach out to both Liz and Robbie. Liz responded first and told me she was shocked by Robbie’s generosity, but that she was so excited because she was making plans to buy two more flats, one for eight more girls and one for eight boys.

Robbie took a little longer to get back to me, but when he did, I found out he was a member of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. I asked him how it was going, and he said he was surprised by the response to what he had done. He told me that when he got back to his place to get his stuff, his parents found him and of course, they were proud of him and hugged him. His dad said to him, “Hey, why don’t you give me the check so you don’t lose it.”

And Robbie said, “Yeah, Dad, about that.”

And his dad said, “What did you do?” I asked him if his folks were now okay with what he had done. He said his mom was fine right away, but his dad will probably take a little longer to accept it. He said that since the article came out, people had been sending him gifts, which completely surprised Robbie. He told me his dad is holding all the gifts and keeping a running tally of the amount. And he reminds Robbie daily that it is nowhere near \$25,000.

I asked Robbie, “Why did you do it?”

He said, “You know, I’m a reasonably good-looking guy. I’m pretty smart. I have a great family. I’m a Presbyterian. I just got a great education. I’ll be fine.

It just seems to me that in this day and age, it is more important that we do good than do well.”

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Identity: *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.*

Purpose: *In order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of God who has brought you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.*

Come on, Church. We are called to this. We were built for this — built with Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

For once you were no people, but now you are God’s people. Once you did not know mercy. But now you know mercy.

Commitment Sunday? Sure. Commitment every day? Absolutely.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹Gonzalez, Catherine Gunsalus. *1&2 Peter and Jude. Belief. A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010, pp. 45–46.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.