

Sermon: You Are a Chosen People

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 3, 2026)

I've been wanting to share with you what had happened, just a few weeks back, during the graveside service of Ken Lister, a longtime member of St. Giles. Technically, it was called an inurnment service as his ashes in an urn was committed to its resting place, alongside his late wife Helen, whom had passed a few years back. At a ripe old age of 100, Ken had indeed lived a faithful and fruitful life. Him and Helen were active in the life of the congregation, right up until the pandemic of 2020. Even when it finally passed, due largely to their reduced mobility, Ken and Helen were not able to attend worship at the church they loved, but never fail to remind me, whenever I had the chance to visit them, to not forget about them. Ken, I did not, and will not.

The service took place outdoor, somewhat informal, and attended largely by his relatives who travelled from various parts of Ontario, and a few members of St. Giles as well. When it was time to call for friends and family to share a short story about Ken, something unusual happened. You see, in a more formal, indoor funeral or memorial service, sharing from family and friends are usually limited and somewhat controlled. I've been trained, in my seminary days, to make sure those sharing do not exceed a certain amount of time, are of appropriate content, and limited to no more than two or three. To be honest, I often find it difficult to get that many people who are willing to speak about the deceased; people seem to have a fear of speaking in public, at least in a formal funeral.

But at Ken's service, based on the request of David, Ken's son, I've kept it fairly informal, and simply allow people to say what they remembered about Ken. And one after another, they did. Those in attendance recounted about Ken's life in relation to their, about his distinguished career at the Ottawa Civic Hospital, about his steadfast contribution to St. Giles. I lost count; and there must've been close to a dozen people who spoke about Ken that day.

Allow me to highlight this one: apparently, Ken was instrumental, thirty or so years ago, in making sure that St. Giles devoted serious money to build the elevator currently serving the building. Apparently, he was in the minority, as most members of the congregation back then did not need an elevator; they were all able and mobile folks. But Ken insisted, this was even before governments enacted accessibility legislations subsequently, urging organizations to make efforts to accommodate those with limited mobility. Ken was a visionary; he insisted that St. Giles needed an elevator, and will one day really benefit from it.

He was right! We all have Ken to thank for that vision. So thank you, Ken. Hope you can hear us.

I've wanted to share this story of Ken, in light of the fact that our 30-year old elevator is probably at the tail-end of its useful life, as it seems to be breaking down more frequently. Just last week, it failed again after our Sunday worship service. Apology to those who were forced to walk the steps down to the ground floor last week. Rob has since called in a technician to fix this latest problem. Furthermore, the Finance & Maintenance Committee is diligently looking into how we could refurbish or modernize the elevator, and how we could afford it. The initial cost estimate is in the ballpark of about \$100k. I know, I know, that's a lot of money, but no need to be alarmed just yet. We are also looking into various subsidies from different levels of government, and doing our due diligence in getting other quotes. In light of the example Ken Lister had given us, the bigger question, in my opinion, is not how we could afford this cost, but how we could afford not to.

The story of Ken Lister is but one of many stories of this glorious church. His contribution is only a brick in the wall, a living stone being built up to a spiritual house, that is grounded and anchored by the cornerstone in Jesus Christ, our Lord and head of the Church Universal. As the Apostle Peter quotes a passage from Prophet Isaiah, "*For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."*" (2 Peter 2:6)

This language of the living stone has its roots in the time of 40 years wandering in the wilderness. The Israelites were thirsty; they cried out to Moses, who in turned cried out to God. God provided them with a rock, with which Moses was to either strike it with his staff, or to simply speak to it. Out of the rock came water, gushing out to satisfy people's thirst.

Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthian Church, identifies the rock as a type of Christ, providing spiritual "living water" to the people. Peter, on the other hand, utilizes the metaphor of a cornerstone to describe Jesus. A cornerstone is the primary stone set in masonry to define the structure's alignment. The sanctuary of St. Giles has one, at the corner of Bank and First, one can go outside and touch it. However, in faith, we understands the chief cornerstone of our church is none other than Christ, the living stone, "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone". The imagery of rejected cornerstone emphasizes the fact that while humanity may disregard Jesus, God has made Him the supreme authority, the primary reference point of our faith, hope and love. He "*who did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, assuming human likeness.*" (Philippians 2:6-7)

I am reminded of this wisdom tale from the Jewish tradition, of the Prince and the Rooster. Once, in an ancient kingdom, there lived a fine and handsome young prince. But one day he got it into his head that he was a rooster. At first the king believed this was simply a passing phase, but when the prince began taking off all his clothes and flapping his arms and crowing like a rooster, the king knew he had a real problem. The prince took up residence under the dining-room table and would eat only kernels of corn dropped onto the royal carpet.

The king was sad to see his son in such a state. He called in his best doctors, miracle workers, magicians. One by one they talked to the prince, tried medicine and magic. But he remained convinced that he was a rooster. One by one they failed. Each time, the rooster crowed. The king fell into a deep depression, convinced that no one could cure his son of his tragic malady. He told his servants to allow no more medicine men or fortune seekers into the palace. He had had enough.

One day an unknown sage approached the palace and loudly knocked upon the palace gate. The king's chief servant cracked open the wooden door and saw an old man with piercing eyes staring at him. "I understand the king's son believes he is a rooster. Well, I am here to convince him otherwise. Please pass on this message to the king," said the unknown sage. "What is it?" said the servant. "Give it and be gone." "Tell the king these words exactly: **'To pull a man out of the mud, sometimes a friend must set foot into that mud.'**

The servant had no idea what it meant, but took the message to the king. Slumped on his throne, the king listened to the cryptic message. "To pull a man out of the mud, a friend must set foot into that mud." Hmm, what did he mean by that? But as he thought about it, the words began to make sense. He sat straight up and said, "Yes, bring him in. I will give him a chance!"

To everyone's amazement, the wise man began by taking off all his clothes. The king shook his head. Now there were two naked men under the dining-room table, crowing like roosters. It's a disaster! However, the prince said to the wise man, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" "Can't you see?" said the sage. "I'm a rooster, just like you." The prince was happy to have found a friend, and the palace resounded with flapping and crowing.

But the next day, the wise man got out from under the table, straightened his back, and stretched. "What? What are you doing?" asked the prince. "Not to worry," said the sage. "Just because you are a rooster doesn't mean you have to live under a table." The prince admired his friend, so he tried it. It was true. A rooster can stand and stretch, and still be a rooster.

The next day, the sage actually put on a shirt and a pair of pants. "Have you lost your mind?" asked the prince. "I was a little chilly," said the sage.

"Besides, just because you are a rooster doesn't mean that you can't put on a man's clothing." Puzzled, the prince reluctantly tried on some clothes.

The sage then asked for a meal to be served on the golden platters of the king. He sat down with the prince, and without realizing it, the prince began to eat. The sage engaged him in a lively conversation about the affairs of the kingdom. Suddenly the prince jumped up from the table and cried, "Don't you realize that we are roosters? How can we be sitting at this table eating and talking as if we were men?" "Aha!" cried the sage. "I will now tell you a great secret. You can dress like a man, eat like a man, and talk like a man, but still remain a rooster." "Hmm," said the prince.

And from that day forward, he behaved just like a man. In a few years, he assumed the throne. He led his kingdom to great glory. But every once in a while, the thought occurred to him that he was, in fact, still a rooster-and when he was all alone he would crow a little bit, just to make sure.

Don't you just love this story, a wisdom tale from the Jewish tradition, perfectly illustrating what Jesus has done for us, that he came to dwell with us so that we may know who we truly are. We are prince not rooster, and according to Peter, Christ came into this world so we can all say, with an utter sense of amazement and pride, that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

Amongst the sea of nations, tribes and peoples, God has somehow chosen us, to fulfill our priestly vocation, that is to stand between people and God, to stand firm in faith and bring others before Christ, so Christ can do His work. How do we do this? Well, its not too difficult, and not so different than what we already do well—we gather to worship, we pray, we serve and we share, of our material possessions, and of our faith in Jesus Christ.

As we gather to mark the one hundred and first anniversary of St. Giles, we stand at a crossroad, of remembering its glorious past, and looking forward to a glorious future, of the vision of Kingdom of God on earth as is in heaven. A vision that we can faintly see now, but will one day be a beautiful living reality.

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