

"A Living Stone"

1 Peter 2:2-10

The 5th Sunday of Lent, April 20, 2008

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, 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.

Prayer.

The concept of past, present, and future is an important one.

It sets us apart from others in the animal kingdom, allowing us to rise to the top of the cognitive pyramid, allowing us to employ intelligence to survive more primitive disputes.

When we can remember our past, learn in the present from our previous successes and failures, and apply this knowledge when confronted by future challenges we develop an advantage that few, if any, of the other members of the animal kingdom enjoy.

It means that wisdom is cumulative. Every generation builds upon the lessons learned from the previous generation. And it means that, within the lifespan, one is always growing wisdom, which serves as an effective buffer for many years against the inevitable nature of aging.

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One doesn't have to be the strongest runner to win the marathon; the folly of youth will burn them out prematurely, allowing the older and more experienced runner to pace themselves and win.

Past, present, and future; there are many symbols and metaphors used to portray this dominant concept: The circle of life, seasons of the year, gems and precious stones.

It is this last metaphor ... the stone ... that the apostles from Peter's community of faith use to teach their sisters and brothers through Asia Minor, that they might endure their suffering and religious persecutions, on behalf of faith, their belief and discipleship of Christ Jesus.

"Come to him, a living stone," Peter writes.

Stones are so common, everyone will know what they are like.

Stones are unique, like people, such that every unique person can be compared to a unique stone.

In the ancient world, stones were not divisible. They were already in their simplest form. Break them apart and what do you have? Two stones.

Stones are tough. Even the softest stone can break the skin. And the toughest, most dense granite or diamond will endure forever.

In New Testament time, stones were the substance of all things built; from the aggregate of a mud plastered hut, to the foundation of the Roman Forum, stones are what all things are built of.

Past, present, future: stones endure.

They've been here long before we came, and will endure long after we leave.

But here, Peter encourages disciples of Jesus to become living stones.

We know stones are in-animate objects. There is no animation, no life, in them. How can this be?

How can we make sense of this apparent contradiction?

For Peter, life is more than living. Life is about being Spirit filled; being filled with the breath of God, being put to use for God's greater purpose, being employed to bring about God's greater will.

So, Peter is encouraging us to be the Spirit filled foundation for that which God is building.

Though rejected by everyone else in society, there is a place for you, not to be just another anonymous building block for what God is building, but to be the chief cornerstone, upon which all else is built.

Be the common, yet unique; be the indivisible, yet tough. Be the substance of all things, enduring until the end, and then, make certain your legacy lasts far beyond

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your earthly days. Be the living stone upon which God can build His everlasting Kingdom.

“Like living stones,” Peter continues, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

If we are to be living, then we must be growing.

If no other stone is built on top of us, we’ll remain a cornerstone, all right, but instead of supporting the spiritual house that God intends, we’ll be nothing more than a trip hazard on a path or a plow breaker out in a field.

We must be the solid foundation upon which we recruit and empower other living stones to be built.

When enough living stones are built together, we will be the spiritual house Peter speaks of. We will become the edifice through which the Holy Spirit can dwell, and work, and blow.

Fresh in Peter’s memory, and in the minds of those to whom he is writing, is the destruction of Jerusalem, the razing of the Temple, and the scattering of the oppressive Jewish priesthood, such that it would never be able to re-emerge.

The priesthood, as far as the students of that era understood it, was dead.

So here, Peter is making a bold call to followers of Jesus: be the new priesthood, be the new leaders, take thou authority to maintain and grow the community of believers.

Be holy, not corrupt like the old priesthood.

Every living stone is to be a member of the new priesthood, not just those born into privilege.

Make your life become the spiritual sacrifice, for God had tired of sacrificial animals. Give your life for Jesus sake, not for personal gain.

Do not allow others to fail and fall. Lift them up and let them build upon your shoulders, on what you have already built.

Once we were scattered. We were dead, living in darkness, in such a harsh place that mercy wasn’t even known.

Now, we are called to sacrifice our life of sin and death.

Christ has gathered us, breathed life into us, called us into the light of day, transparent for all to see.

We are called to be the anchoring cornerstone, one that, once set, is nearly impossible to move.

We are called to build, such that by our collective lives, we are to become the eternal dwelling of God’s Holy Spirit.

Dearly beloved, this is an exceptionally high calling.

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It is not enough to go along to get along.

There is no place in the Church where one can hide in a crowd.

More of a sacrifice is required than simply praying about our problems, then crossing our fingers and hoping God will pull us through for another year.

If we are to be the holy priesthood, the spiritual dwelling for the Holy Spirit, the living stones upon which all others are built, then we must take a more active role, more responsibility, for the trajectory of our faith in today's world.

If we truly believe, as I've heard so many complain, that the world is going to hell in a hand basket, then we have none other to blame than ourselves, because, by our inaction, we've allowed it to happen.

The same is true today, as it was in the first century world to which Peter was writing.

We, here at Zion, may not be able to address the big issues of the world. We are not going to single-handedly turn around our denomination's plunging membership rolls or worship attendance.

We can only change ourselves.

We can only make the faithful sacrifices in our own lives that Peter is calling.

We can only make ourselves the holy priesthood, the living stones, the foundation for God's spiritual house.

And hopefully, prayerfully, by our example, others just might build.

Amen.

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