

“Built into a Spiritual House”

1 Peter 2:2-10

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

May 10, 2020

Easter V

We have several lovely passages before us today. The passage from Psalm 31 is a fervent prayer for rescue and deliverance, uttered by someone who was clinging to God as their rock, their refuge, their strong fortress. It's a prayer we can use whenever we are feeling worried, desperate, or afraid. The passage from John 14 is a teaching from Jesus about the home that is waiting for us in God's house. In it, Jesus affirms that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that the only way to God the Father is through him. This is a teaching we should always bear in mind whenever we are having conversations with people of other faiths, about matters of faith. For us Christians, Jesus is central, and indispensable.

As important as both of those topics are, I want to direct our attention this morning to the passage from 1 Peter. Peter was writing to Christians in various churches who were experiencing some form of persecution or discrimination, but here he just offers some general instruction, some guidance for these Christians in their daily living, regardless of whatever else may be going on. It's still good guidance for us today, both in “normal” times as well as the “abnormal” times we are living in now.

Peter begins with an analogy: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk.” I've had the joyous experience of being present for the births of each of my five children. I remember those first newborn cries, those first cries of shock or distress or hunger, a welcome sound to all of us in the room, the sound of a healthy baby, a precious gift from God – though I suspect, from the newborn's perspective, it wasn't very joyous, to be suddenly thrust into a completely unfamiliar world, outside the snug comfort of their mother's womb. Yet if all goes smoothly, in fairly short order, the baby snuggles up to its mother's breast, sucking peacefully. The baby quickly learns that there is a place to go when it is hungry or distressed, a safe place, a strong fortress, where it can be nourished and fed.

Babies grow, they wean; eventually, they learn how to fix their own food. Those of us who are adults may not remember what it was like when we were *utterly* dependent on someone else to give us nourishment. We may not remember what it was like to *long* for the comfort of milk. Peter is trying to get us to remember. Remember that safe place, remember the comfort, remember the strength, remember the *love*. Remember how it *felt* to go from the feelings of distress or hunger to the feelings of peace and contentment. *God provides for us what mothers provide for their newborns*. Except it's *spiritual*, not physical. God offers us a *pure, spiritual milk* – a milk that, if we're wise, we *long* for.

What benefit does this milk provide? Peter tells us. “Long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.” So that we may *grow* into *salvation!* There is a sense in which we have already been saved, on the cross, and when we claimed that salvation for ourselves in the waters of

baptism and in the vows we made when we joined the church. But there is also a sense in which the process of salvation is *ongoing*. We are all works-in-progress; God isn't finished with *any* of us. Those newborn babies use the nutrients in milk to grow healthy and strong. We use God's spiritual milk to grow healthy and strong *in the faith*. We don't progress from infancy to adulthood in one single step. There are many *years* in between. So too in our faith. Our spiritual growth is a *lifelong* process.

Peter is inviting these Christians – Peter is inviting *us* – to keep progressing on the journey. “Come to him,” he says, “come to him, a living stone.” This “living stone” is Jesus. “See, I am laying a stone,” Peter quotes from Isaiah (28:16), “a chosen and precious cornerstone.” A cornerstone is a foundation stone, the first stone that is set in place. This is the stone that determines the position of the entire building; all other stones will be placed in reference to that one. This is who Jesus is for us – the cornerstone. “The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” (Isaiah 28:16) There were those who rejected Jesus, those who took their stand against him; he was “the stone that the builders rejected” (Psalm 118:22); “a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (Isaiah 8:14). Peter explains: “they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.” The religious leaders took their stand against Jesus; we read about that in the gospels; the thing is, they were all – unbeknownst to them – playing a role that they had been destined to fill. That's a little beyond the scope of today's sermon; Peter's just trying to make it clear that Jesus is the most important stone, the cornerstone, the one that stands at the foundation of the whole spiritual house.

And we – we are stones too. Like Jesus, we are *living* stones. “Like living stones,” Peter says, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a royal priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” God wants to take our lives and place them in the same house, the same structure, where Jesus is the cornerstone. God wants *our* lives to take our direction from *his* life. All of us are invited to take our reference and our bearing from Jesus. We thus become a “royal priesthood” – priests in the service of the High Priest, Jesus Christ. What do priests do? They offer sacrifices. For close to a thousand years, Israel's priests performed sacrifices every day in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus's priesthood is of a different sort; *his* was the sacrifice that ended all sacrifices; *he* was the Lamb that took away the sin of the world. Sacrifices still exist in this temple we call “Christianity,” but they are not animal sacrifices, they are *spiritual* sacrifices – “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ,” as Peter puts it. What are *spiritual* sacrifices? Hang on; I'll get there in a minute!

“You are a chosen race,” Peter says to Christians both then and now, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.” God is building a spiritual house, starting with a cornerstone, continuing with all of us living stones; the whole structure is a group of people who have been *chosen* by God to perform a particular *function*, called to a particular *purpose*. Royal priesthood. Holy nation. Spiritual sacrifices. *God's own people*. God created *everybody* on this planet – but those who take their bearing from the cornerstone, *those* people are the ones God calls *his own*. Anybody is welcome; anybody can come in; anybody can become a “living stone,” can become part of this house, *if* they are willing to take their direction from the cornerstone. That is what the Christians Peter was writing to had done. “Once you were not a people,” Peter says, “but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” God has called them – and us – “out of darkness into his marvelous light.” God has called you so that “you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you.” Which means – God doesn't call us to just be *silent*. God calls us to *tell the world the gospel truth*.

This passage, by the way, is the reason why we call our newsletter “The Cornerstone” – that's a

reference to Jesus, the reason why our church exists – and why I call my email updates “Living Stones.” That’s a reference to *you* – to *all* of us who are responding to God’s call to “grow into salvation.”

But what about those “spiritual sacrifices”? What, exactly, is God calling upon us to sacrifice? There’s an answer to that question, but to find it, we have to look slightly beyond the contours of this passage. We have to look at the larger context, at the verse that comes immediately *before* this passage, and the verse that comes immediately *after*. The verse just before this passage says: “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.” And the verse just after this passage says: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against your soul.” Our passage this morning is bound on both ends by *specific things that Peter tells us not to do* – things that God is asking us to *give up*. Things that, if you will, we are being called to *sacrifice*. Rid yourselves of all *malice* – every wicked way in you. Rid yourselves of all *guile* – every deceit, every attempt to trick other people. Rid yourselves of all *insincerity* – every falsehood, every lie, every pretense. Rid yourselves of all *envy* – every resentment you feel towards other people for the things they have that you don’t. Rid yourselves of all *slander* – every claim you make about any other person that isn’t entirely, 100% *true*. Rid yourself of *all* of that! “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.” Salvation isn’t something that just *happens*. It’s something that happens *in us* as we progress in our Christian walk! And it involves some *sacrifices*. We have to be willing to *give up some things*, some behaviors, some practices, that maybe we’re reluctant to part with. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation;” *therefore*, “abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against your soul.” What *urges* do you have, what *longings* do you experience, what *desires* do you feel in your heart that *don’t come from God*? We have to be willing to part with *all* of these; in Peter’s words, we have to *abstain from* them. We may not be able to get rid of the *urges* – but we have to work at *mastering* those urges. Think back to the story of Cain and Abel in the early chapters of Genesis: Cain was angry, and jealous of his brother Abel. God said to Cain, “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but *you must master it*.” (Genesis 4:7) Cain couldn’t master his unholy urges, he failed to do what God asked him to do, and his brother Abel ended up dead – at his own hands. *This is what Peter is talking about* – the unholy urges that lurk within *all* our hearts. What God said to Cain, Peter says to all of us: “abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against your soul!” If you are feeling an unholy urge, you need to *do something about it*, you need to *get it under control*, before *it gains control of you*. *This is what it means to be a Christian worthy of living in God’s spiritual house*. If we’re not willing to part with our sinful ways, *we don’t belong in the house*. The whole idea is that all these “living stones” are taking their direction, their bearing, from the cornerstone. If we’re not willing to *really* follow Jesus, *we bring the integrity of the entire house into question*. Christianity has lost a lot of credibility over the years – too many scandals, too much hypocrisy – people outside the church look at the spiritual house we have built, and they see all the flaws. *We have to make this a greater priority: drinking in the spiritual milk that comes from God, so that we will be better able to say “no” to all the unholy urges that enter our hearts*. That’s what God has been asking from the very beginning; that’s what will restore our credibility in the eyes of the world; that’s what will lead us into the salvation that Peter is talking about.

So we’ve got some work to do. We’ve got some *sacrifices* we need to make, some things in our lives we need to *burn*. We’ve got a spiritual house to build. May God grant us strength, and courage, and wisdom, and guidance, as we continue to strive to become the people God would have us be.

© 2020 Rev. Bill Pinches