

2nd Presbyterian Church - Petersburg

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“Living Stones”

(Proverbs 14: 1-2; 1 Peter 2: 2-10)

“Come to him, a living stone, ... 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.” (1 Peter 2: 4-5)

Stones. Have you ever thought of yourself as a stone? Probably not. Stones are inanimate, not usually described as being “alive.” And stones are, for the most part, very difficult to move. The bigger the stone, the heavier the equipment that’s needed to move it. I remember, as a child, looking at what seemed to be a rather small stone and then trying to lift it. And I remember being shocked to find out just how heavy a small stone could be! It’s difficult to manage because it’s so hard. It’s solid and does absolutely nothing to help with the move. It just sits there, stationary, without thought or feeling. The rock has no inkling what’s happening to it. Given these unflattering characteristics, why would anyone compare us to stones?! Thanks a lot, Peter. Am I right?

And yet – if we think it through, we realize that there are recurring images of stones in the scriptures. From some of the earliest writings and in some of the earliest stories, we can recall “...stone pillars being placed to mark the acts of God; stone for building homes and fortresses; stones as the site of wells; stones for altars; water-bearing stones; tomb-sealing stones; and stones thrown to mark the judgment of a community. One of Jesus’ most devoted disciples, Peter, is called the rock, on whom Jesus will build his church.

In the first epistle of Peter, Jesus is presented as a rejected stone, implying a flaw or lack in some way that would have made him not good enough to occupy the most important, foundational role [that of the cornerstone] – and yet he does. Like him, Peter

says, we are *living stones*.¹ What does that mean? Well, first I got to thinking about a cornerstone. And, though I'm not experienced in building, I have understood that a cornerstone is important. I imagine it has special importance in that it stabilizes what's built around and on top of it. I also imagine that if a cornerstone is somehow "weakened," the entire structure would be compromised. Are there any builders here? How am I doing?

To ensure that I was on the right track I looked up some information on cornerstones and found this explanation: "The **cornerstone** (or **foundation stone**) concept is derived from the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone, thus determining the position of the entire structure.

Over time a cornerstone became a ceremonial masonry stone, or replica, set in a prominent location on the outside of a building, with an inscription on the stone indicating the construction dates of the building and the names of architect, builder, and other significant individuals. The rite of laying a cornerstone is an important cultural component of eastern architecture and metaphorically in sacred architecture generally. Some cornerstones include time capsules from, or engravings commemorating, the time a particular building was built."

I In fact, I can believe this all to be true, because I remember when I went to the Holy Land a number of years ago, there was stone everywhere – especially when we arrived in Jerusalem! Everywhere you look, practically every structure is built from stone

¹Varghese, Winnie. *A Preacher's Guide to LECTIONARY SERMON SERIES: THEMATIC PLANS FOR YEARS A, B, AND C* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2016), p. 36.

– floors, walls, ceilings, everything! No wonder Peter uses this as an analogy. The people whom Peter was writing to at that time were very familiar with the concept of building with stone! They were surrounded by it!

This is probably more information than you were hoping to get, but I found it all fascinating, since I was intrigued by the image of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, being compared to a cornerstone. In fact, the apostle Paul mentions it quite a few times, even calling Jesus not just a cornerstone, but he writes that Jesus is “the chief cornerstone.”

And so with all of this imagery in our minds of Jesus as “the chief cornerstone,” and then Peter’s description of and charge to us to become “living stones” and to allow ourselves “to be built into a spiritual house,” what should we take away from all of this?

Well, for one, I think it’s important to note that – unlike regular stones, which as I said before, aren’t aware of what’s happening to them and a builder does whatever he or she wants with them – Peter calls us to be the exact opposite. Peter tells us to be “living stones.” To me, that implies that we are aware of what’s happening to us. It implies that we’re not only “aware,” but that we are to be cooperative with the builder. And who is building something with Jesus as the chief cornerstone and with us as living stones? Of course, God!

So here we are given the message that we are to be cooperating with God’s activity in our lives and in the world around us. Amen? This is a phrase that is often included in my sermons: “We should be cooperating with God’s activity in our lives and in the world around us.” Indeed, this message is woven throughout the Word of God. It just comes in

different forms and in the use of different analogies. I suppose, like Jesus, God continues to try to teach us in as many different ways so that we will all “get it.”

In fact, this short passage in 1 Peter is full of incredible images for God, for Jesus, and for us, as God’s children, disciples, worker-bees. We’re told to “let ourselves be built into a spiritual house.” We’re told to be a “royal priesthood,” to “offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” We’re told that “if we believe in Jesus we will never be put to shame” and that when we believe we will understand that Jesus is “precious.”

And then we get to verse 9 of this beautiful and well-known passage in 1 Peter. *“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.” (1 Peter 2:9)*

Brothers and sisters, if ever you’re feeling low and not feeling good about yourself, just read through this passage in 1 Peter! I don’t know how anyone could read this and not feel better about oneself. When I read this out loud or hear it read to me, I can feel my shoulders automatically straightening and I find myself standing taller and more resolute, because I remember that I belong to God and that’s a very special identity! God has chosen me, God has claimed me, God has brought me out of darkness into the marvelous light! Hallelujah, friends! And my Lord and Savior, the very one whom the world had rejected and put to death, has arisen and has become the chief cornerstone of the Kingdom of God! Friends, the battle may be raging, but the war has already been won! “Hallelujah!”

And then this passage ends with even more Good News – “*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.*” (1 Peter 2:10) This is indeed incredibly Good News! Not only have we been forgiven of our sins, our faults and our failings, but now we belong to God. We have a home – a loving, welcoming, warm home. And we have an identity – we are God’s people. Isn’t that wonderful? Doesn’t that feel good to know?

And guess what, friends? That’s exactly the kind of Good News that this world needs to hear! There are so many people in the world today who are “homeless” – and I’m not just talking about those who don’t have a physical place to sleep at night; although I do care about them a great deal and I think it’s important for us to do what we can to help those who are in need of physical shelter. But right now I’m talking about so many people who don’t know what mercy is and that they can receive it, because they’ve never experienced it. I’m talking about so many people who have no place to “belong.” I’m talking about people who’ve been let down or mistreated by others and who feel completely alone and isolated in the world. I’m talking about people who feel “hopeless.” This leaves them “*spiritually* homeless!”

Wouldn’t it be Good News for them to hear from you that their future could look different? Wouldn’t it be Good News to know that they don’t have to go through life feeling as if they’re surrounded by darkness? Oh, dear friends, tell them, please! Be God’s people; be God’s mouthpiece, shout it from the mountaintops: GOD IS ALIVE! God has *chosen* to be **merciful!** God longs to forgive you and bring you out of the darkness and into God’s own marvelous light! God loves you! Be a living stone for Him!

There's a wonderful song that always makes me cry. It's called, "People Need the Lord," and friends, there is no truer fact.

We all need God, and the truth is, (and I hope this isn't too much of a shock to you, but) God doesn't live here in this building! In fact, God's presence isn't confined to church buildings and sanctuaries all over the world. I'm not saying it isn't good to come here – and to prepare to meet God here, but we mustn't get confused by the fact that we have a designated place to worship. Why? Because God is so much bigger than this building! Even if we put all the churches, sanctuaries, and temples all over the globe all together in one place, it still wouldn't be enough to contain God's almighty power! Indeed, God's Word tells us that God is everywhere, all at once and at the same time. Omnipresent! God's Holy Spirit is everywhere all the time – and especially, God's mouthpiece and message resounds from God's people wherever they are!

As the children often sing: "The Church is not a building; the Church is not a steeple; the Church is not a resting place, the Church is a people! I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world, Yes, we're the church together!"

Dear friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this morning it's my hope and prayer that you would be willing to be used by God. Please - don't be a plain old, dead stone that's immovable and feels and says nothing. As Peter encourages us, "Be spiritually alive!" Be willing to be used by God! Make sure that you're alive and open to hearing from God, so that God can use you whenever and wherever he calls you.

Determine to live out your identity as God's people, the Church, and make sure you're in line with and in reference to the Chief Cornerstone, Jesus Christ, so that you

will remain solid and strong and be effective in your role as part of the living Body of Christ, the Church. And in everything you do and say, be thankful, for God loves you and has plans to use you for God's own Glory. What more could "living stones" possibly desire, than to fulfill their purpose and remain strong and vital? Amen.

"Now, to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by His blood and made us to be a kingdom, priests of His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."