

“God’s Own People”

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1Peter 2:1-10

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. **2** Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— **3** if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and **5** 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. **6** 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.”

7 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,”

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

A LETTER TO EXILES

These past few weeks we have been reading Peter's first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor, modern day northern Turkey.

These Christians didn't feel at home in the place where they lived. In fact, Peter referred to them as exiles.

They were exiles because they were far from home.
They were exiles because their way of life was different.
And most of all they were exiles because their religion was misunderstood and misrepresented by others.

The locals were suspicious of these Christians.
Some even said that would their faith was dangerous. And, as it often happens today, suspicion and fear led to persecution.

What could Peter say to these exiles?
How could he encourage them?
How could they stay true to what they believed while living as strangers in a strange land?

Peter reminded them of the hope that was theirs in Christ Jesus.

The death and resurrection of Jesus was more than just a story about what happened in the past. It provided the template, the pattern for what God would do in the future.

The death and resurrection of Jesus provided a "living hope" that would give them strength for the living of their days.

Instead of weakening their faith, this time of suffering and exile would strengthen their faith.
As precious metal is refined by fire, so these exiled Christians would be strengthened by this time of trial.

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

The people to whom Peter wrote were second generation Christians.

They had not seen Jesus.
How could they learn to trust and believe in Him?

According to Peter they could learn to trust in the risen Christ by standing on his promises. They would look to the “living and enduring Word of God” for hope in their time of trial.

We talked about this last week.

The Word of God is not just about what God did way back when.
The Word of God is about what God is doing here and now.

And we when we study God’s Word in the right way, it leads to right action.
In response to that eternal Truth, we love one another.

If your study of God’s Word doesn’t lead you to love, you’ve got it wrong.
The eternal Word of God is a Word of grace.

Last week I mentioned Paul’s first letter to Corinthians in which he said three things last: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.

God’s eternal Word is the story of love.
God’s Word is about the triumph of grace.
And that means Christians are to be a gracious people.

GRACIOUS LIVING

That’s where our lesson for today begins.

Since we are filled with the love of God in Christ Jesus,
and since we we trust in the promises of God’s Word,
we need to rid ourselves of those characteristics that don’t fit with this new way of life.

Specifically, Peter lists malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander.

When I looked at this list, I thought to myself,
“These are the words that motivate the lives of many people today.”
And sadly, if I’m being honest, these words often motivate my own actions.

How can we learn to live a Christian life in a world that promotes malice, insincerity and slander?

How can we say “no” to those things that seem to be a part of the very fabric of society?

I would suggest that we begin by affirming a new way of life.

Christian living is about more than just saying “no” to those things that are harmful to our life together.

Christian living is about embracing those things that bring us together.

MOTHER’S MILK

The example Peter uses is a nursing mother.

Mother’s milk is exactly what an infant needs.

The baby longs for it.

Nothing else is quite as good.

Mother’s milk helps a baby grow and become strong.

In the same way, Christians need the “spiritual milk” of God’s Word.

We long for it.

Nothing else is quite as good

Someone once said,

“We are what we eat.”

But, unfortunately, we often live on junk food.

That’s true literally.

Our health is often determined by our diet.

And this also applies to our spiritual life.

People try to control our actions by feeding us junk food.

They appeal to our anger, our envy, and or desire to hear the latest gossip.

Think about it.

This is the template for many of those so-called reality shows on TV ... anger, insincerity, gossip and slander.

These characteristics form the standard playbook for many politicians.

Peter tells us that a steady diet of this stuff can be bad for our spiritual health.

We need something else.

We need pure, spiritual milk in order to grow as Christians.

God's Word must become a living reality in our lives.

TASTE AND SEE

We must put off the old way of life so that we can put the new way of life into practice.

We must (as the Bible puts it) taste and see that the Lord is good.

Think about it this way.

What would you rather do ... read a book about delicious meals or eat a delicious meal?

Would you rather get a book of recipes for Christmas?

Or would you rather get a gift certificate to Bonefish Grill?

I know what I would rather receive as a present.

I want to taste and see.

I want to experience the different flavors.

I want the nutrition that comes from good food.

I want the joy of sharing a banquet with the people I love.

Well, it's the same with our Christian life.

We taste and see that the Lord is good.

The Word of God in Christ is the bread of heaven.

This is what we really need.

This is what we crave.

This bread satisfies a hunger that even the blue plate special can't satisfy.

And this is the meal that brings us together at the table of grace.

LIVING STONES

Where do we find this table of grace?
We find it in the church.

In verse 4 Peter describes the church as a spiritual house built of “living stones”, and the cornerstone of this house is the Spirit of the risen Christ.

When the stone of death was rolled away he became the living stone, the living gracious presence which guides the building of God’s church.

There’s a history to this living stone language.
In Matthew’s gospel Jesus asks his disciples,
“Who do you say that I am?”

And it is Peter who answers.
He says that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus responds by saying that Peter will live up to his name.
He will be the “petros”, he will be the “rock” on which the church will be built.

I’ve often wondered what was so rock like about Peter.

Peter was rash in his leadership style.
He often flip flopped on important issues.

And when the going got rough, sometimes Peter thought that “plausible deniability” was the safer course of action.

So how is the church built on Peter?

The church is not built on Peter, the man.
The church is built on the confession that Peter made.

And that rock like confession was not due to Peter’s personal strength.
Jesus said that it was due to the fact that God had revealed this to him.

In our lesson for today, Peter makes this point plain.
He begins with Jesus.

Jesus is the starting point for this living building that we call the church.

Jesus is the living stone who was rejected by the world but chosen by God.

So how do we become a part of the church?

We do it by becoming a living stone.

We let our life be guided by Jesus' life.

We let our life be built on the foundation of the gospel.

And, when that happens, this brings us together with other Christians in this special relationship that we call the church.

Faith is about more than just our personal relationship with Jesus.

Faith is about becoming a part of God's people.

The church is a living building made up of all those who follow Jesus.

And the church is a much bigger building project than you might imagine.

The church is comprised of those of us who struggle to follow Jesus today, those who have gone on to be with the Lord eternally in glory, and I would say the church is also made up of those who will follow Jesus in the future.

When I think of the church, I think of those great cathedrals that were built over many generations.

These grand buildings never seemed to be complete.

There are always more stones to be added and repairs to be made.

The same is true of the true church, the living stones that make up the people of God.

We are always on the move.

We are always a work in progress.

But, one thing stays the same, Jesus.

The church's cornerstone is Jesus.

The life of Jesus guides all that we do and say.

CHOSEN EXILES

There's a word of warning at this point in our passage.
Not everyone will like the cornerstone of our message.
The one who guides our life will be a stumbling block to many.

And when we follow Jesus, we will often be in conflict with the ways of the world.

Jesus has chosen us to be His followers, but many in the world have found the ways of Jesus to be foolish.

They rejected and crucified Jesus when he brought God's message of grace, and Jesus frankly told his disciples that they could expect the same treatment.

When you follow Jesus, it is a decision to take up a cross and follow.

The Christians to whom this letter was addressed felt the sting of that rejection.

They were exiles in their own home town.

But, Peter reminded them that they were not exiles in God's eyes.

They were a part of the living church built upon the cornerstone of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Peter wrote,

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people ..."

In a world that says you are a nobody, that you are not important, that you are a foreigner that doesn't belong ... God in Christ says,

"You are special.

You have been chosen.

You are God's own people."

This is a message that we need to hear.

All of us struggle with a poor self-image.

We struggle to prove ourselves worthy in a world that judges so harshly.

All of us, in one way or another, are exiles in our own home town.

But, the gospel offers hope to exiles.

The gospel tells us:

God loves you.

God thinks that you are special.

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

And God has given you the joyful task of showing that unconditional love to others.

You get to tell the story of God's grace to others.

That's why Peter writes that we are called to be a royal priesthood. A priest represents the grace of God before the people.

And since we believe in the priesthood of all believers, that's the task that all of us have been given.

That's our reason for being as a church.

This past week I read an article by a seminary professor and a very successful pastor.

He made a bold and controversial statement.

He said that we have built too many churches.

We are over churched!

Wow.

That really is a bold statement.

I always thought that we can't have too many churches.

Right?

Well.

Yes and no.

His point was that most of churches structure their ministry and mission to care for the needs of their own members and not to reach out to those who are unchurched.

In essence we are in competition for a limited number of people who are already Christians in our own area. And so we build new buildings and develop new programs in hopes of attracting people from a limited pool of possible members.

He said this was true of most churches, regardless of denomination.

Now many churches would state that they want to reach those who don't know Christ as Savior and Lord. But, what we actually do ... how we plan our mission and message says something else.

Several weeks ago I mentioned the projections for our area from a demographic survey called Mission Insight. Our area, our mission field is going to grow like gangbusters in the next ten years.

But, many of the people who are coming to our area won't be church goers. And most of the people who are coming to our area won't be Presbyterian.

You could see this as bad news.

And it is bad news if all we intend to do is promote what someone called "the circulation of the saints" ... shuttling members between competing churches in the area.

But, if we plan to reach out to those who do not know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then (as the Bible puts it) the fields are ready to harvest. It is a great opportunity.

Let me be honest.

I'm not exactly sure how we do this.

Much of my training and experience has been the business of making the institutional church survive, if not always thrive.

But, I am willing to try something different because I believe the message of the gospel itself calls us to move on.

The message of the gospel calls us to build the church of Jesus Christ, not with brick and mortar but with living stones ... with people who have been touched by the grace of God.

For many years the church life of most denominations has been set in stone.

You can take that literally and figuratively in the Presbyterian Church!

Peter tells us we need to build our churches with a different kind of stone, living stones.

The cornerstone doesn't change.

Christ still gives us our direction and message.

CHOSEN TO TELL OUR STORY

But, the unique stories of the people who have been called by Christ do change.

Like the saints of old we are on a journey toward the city of God.

We are rolling stones ... always willing to go where God might lead us next.

We may often feel like exiles in this world.

But, Peter tells us that we are God's chosen exiles.

And we have been chosen for a purpose.

We have been chosen to tell our story.

Once we were no people ... feeling exiled and alone.

Now we are God's people.

The story of God's mercy comes through many people and in many forms.

You can see this in the variety of faith stories in the Bible.

But, each story is important.

Each story draws us together as a community formed by the mercy of God.

And here's the main point.

Your story of God's grace is important.

How has the mercy of God come into your life?

How did you go from darkness into light?

Maybe you're not sure.

Think about it.

How does God's forgiveness and grace shape your life?

And once you've answered that question, tell your story.
Tell others how the mercy of God came into your life.
This is how we become part of God's ongoing building project,
a project made up of living stones.

We are the people of God.

Amen.