



“Living Stones”
Scripture – 1 Peters 2:1-10
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 28, 2018

The First Letter of Peter – whose very name means rock – was written near the end of the first century. It was addressed to followers of Jesus living in Asia Minor, an overwhelmingly pagan environment. These new Christians were a slandered minority who suffered ridicule and more for what their neighbors thought was a peculiar way of thinking and living.

The letter is a pep talk to remind them that despite being out of sync with their society, they are on a path that will lead them to a deeper way of living. They are to relinquish their old habits and stale patterns and embrace a higher way – the rich life that begins to flourish when you follow Jesus.

Living as we do in a society gone secular, we can in some ways identify with the original audience. If we follow the way of Jesus in 21st century America, we will not be in lock-step with our society.

A few years ago, the New York Times ran a weekly column titled, “Sunday Routine.” For two years, they shared interviews with prominent New Yorkers on how they spent their Sundays. Most talked about sleeping in, having brunch, exercising, and spending time with family. Some went to flea markets, used bookstores, and movies. A handful mentioned going to church, but not many. One notable exception was a woman, a deputy mayor in the city, who said she went to church because it prompted her to reflect on the work she does, how she does it, and why she does it.¹

As I have noted in the past, the Pew Research Center has conducted surveys that indicate most Americans claim they possess a spiritual life. However, increasing numbers of them are not connected to a church. They are attracted to Jesus, but not the institutional church.

That is why Jeff Bethke’s rap song went viral on YouTube and tallied so many hits. His video was entitled, “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus.” Here are some of his lines:

“I mean if religion is so great, why has it started so many wars,
Why does it build big churches but fails to feed the poor?
Now I ain’t judging, I’m just saying quit putting on a fake look,
Cause there’s a problem if people only know you’re a Christian by your Facebook.”

He pummels the usual suspects: hypocrisy, self-righteousness, blindness to the world’s needs, and resistance to change. It is popular to level such charges because many people have experienced one or more of these attitudes

in a church. Such talk is also popular because most Americans are suspicious of practically every institution in our society – government, schools, big business, the police. Many feel that simply by virtue of being an institution, the church is corrupt and not to be trusted.

The flames of distrust are also fanned by the rampant individualism of our culture. Some boast, “No one can tell me what to do!” as if this is a noble stand to take. Yet more and more people find themselves cut off from others, isolated and alone. We should respect individual rights and viewpoints, but not glorify individualism because it is at war with our basic nature. As John O’Donohue writes, “The hunger to belong is at the heart of our nature. Cut off from others, we atrophy and turn in on ourselves...No one was created for isolation. When we become isolated, our minds lose their flexibility and natural kindness; we become vulnerable to fear and negativity. The sense of belonging keeps you in balance.”² The more we are cut off from others the more suspicious we become and the easier it is to demonize.

The internet has revealed this in spades. People post cruel comments they would never say to a person’s face and some fabricate stories to cast another in the worst light. Today’s passage is focused on the very opposite – bringing people together and solidifying a community of faith. The author reminds his audience that they are not isolated individuals attracted to Jesus. They are a community of believers bound together in Christ.

He uses the metaphor of a stone building to emphasize their unity. His sentences are actually a patchwork of verses he pulled from the Hebrew Scriptures. It is almost as if he did a word search on the word “stone” and came up with a handful of verses – three from the Psalms, two from Isaiah and one from Hosea. God’s Spirit inspired a reworking of the words he cut and pasted into his letter to provide an image of their new identity. We read: “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.”

Gaze at the walls of our awe-inspiring sanctuary and imagine the immigrant stone masons who constructed this house of worship over 100 years ago. Picture them spreading a thick layer of mortar, then lifting a hefty stone and dropping it into place. Then picking up a second stone and setting it beside the first, and filling the gap between the stones with additional mortar. Then tapping the stones with a mallet to move them to their precise position. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, the process continued for many months as thousands of stones gradually built this magnificent edifice.

The First Letter of Peter summons each of us to imagine that we are similar to these stones. Some large, some small, and each with its own unique shape and character – and we definitely have our share of characters! We are not simply a pile of rocks or individual stones strewn across the ground. We have a definite form because we are bound together by the mortar of love to form the Body of Christ. Jesus is the cornerstone and we are the stones – the living stones – that cluster together around him to form the community of faith.

A church whose foundation is Jesus is not simply a place for individuals to get a little religion, to find a bit of intellectual stimulation, or to forge a few friendships. A church is not merely a place to have our guilt absolved or to hear about moral values or to eke out a little hope in a world grown cold and cynical.

A church whose foundation is Jesus is a community of believers where people recognize their need for God and for one another, where we catch God’s vision of a world characterized by love, justice and peace, and where we strive together to embody God’s dream. Creating such a community is a mighty challenge in a world that touts individualism which leads to loneliness and a ruthless philosophy of survival of the fittest. Creating such a community requires a fierce commitment in a world that promotes consumerism – which claims that joy and satisfaction are just a purchase away.

Tom Long says, “When the world looks at the church, it should see not simply another social organization trying to raise money and keep its membership up; it should see a living embodiment of the kingdom of God, a community of faith where leaders serve instead of swagger, where the weak are nourished instead of cast aside, where people who lose their way are not forgotten but restored, where people cultivate mercy and forgiveness as if they were the rare flowers of heaven.”

It is impossible to calculate how much society benefits from the church, but we are certain it does. Who can say how many marriages have been saved and enriched by faith communities? How many youth found a better path and the will to resist drugs? How many suicides were averted because the church helped people find a purpose? How many spawned a generous spirit thanks to a family of faith? How many souls were kept from going hungry? How many children found the mentor they needed to learn the importance of honesty and respect? How many suffering people discovered shoulders to lean on when they were trudging their darkest valley? How many men and women were inspired to speak out against injustice and to work for peace? This is to say nothing about the number of schools, hospitals, feeding programs, day cares, refugee resettlement ministries, halfway houses, and counseling centers created by the Church.

Remember the young rapper I mentioned earlier? When I heard his rap, I thought, “You have obviously never been to Westminster!” We are by no means a perfect place, but he would find a very different spirit in our church family than the kind of church he excoriated in his rant.

Then, I read that there was more to his story. While a lot of people identified with his song and gave him kudos and the emoji with the thumbs up, one person wrote him a thoughtful line-by-line critique. The rapper wrote back: “I just wanted to say I really appreciate your article. It hit me hard. But I’ll be honest and say I agree 100 percent.”

He went on to say, “God has been working with me in the last six months on loving Jesus AND loving his church.” In a later interview he said, “It’s really cool for my generation to say ‘I love Jesus but hate the church,’ but that’s not honoring God, because the church is his number one...The church is plan A, and there is no plan B.” The young rapper is now a member of a church.³

The church can be a messy and dysfunctional place and it can be a beautiful and caring place. What a blessing you and I share to be living stones in an active, welcoming, compassionate community of faith with a rich heritage and a very promising future.

NOTES

1. Erin Keys, “Spiritual, But Not Religious,” May 29, 2011.
2. John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: Perennial, 1999), p. xxii.
3. Michael Lindvall, “Jesus without Church?”

Blessing of the Prayer Shawls ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Weaver of Creation, Comfort of the Weary –

As we bless these prayer shawls, we celebrate the opportunity to share tangible gifts of compassion with those in need. We give thanks for the artistry, dedication, and care of Close Knit, and pray that the love with which these shawls were created may encircle those who receive them. We lift before you these sisters and brothers – many of whom know too well the shroud of grief, the ache of loneliness, or the pain of illness – and we entrust them to your care.

Gracious God –

Bless these shawls, that they may be reminders of the faithful love and abiding care you bestow upon all people – especially those who yearn for your comfort.

Bless those who receive these gifts, that they may feel your tender embrace whenever they wrap them around their shoulders and know in their hearts the comfort of your presence.

And bless us – we pray – to your service, that we might offer compassion, practice kindness, nurture peace, and participate in your healing work ... until the day when every tear is wiped away and all creation sings for joy.

We lift this and every prayer in the name of your son, who gave us words to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**