

First Presbyterian Church
“As Living Stones,” 1 Peter 2:4-10
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/30/2023

I was a free agent in high school.

Lunch times were for wandering around
to find a place to sit where nobody else was.

Not because I wanted to be a loner -- but simply because
that was the state of my social life.

When I did seek out a regular table or bench with other students,
the results were mostly disastrous.

Fighting for respect, defending myself at every turn,
essentially without a sense of belonging.

A highlight reel of my teen years would not be pretty—

I was desperate to belong, and pretty bad and getting it done.

This is the common experience of humanity – that we seek places of belonging,
and we feel defenseless without a tribe to belong to.

How else could scientists explain the conundrum of people’s fanatical devotion
to Taylor Swift?

The hoards of people who hang on every moment in Swift’s life
are known as “Swifties.”

For instance, Swifties recently celebrated the fourth anniversary of the day
that Taylor Swift ... (wait for it) ...adopted her cat, Benjamin.

If you already knew that, you might be a Swifty.

But I shouldn’t be too hard on Swifties because they learned everything they know
from the Grobanites – a tribe of Josh Groban uber fans.

One of these Grobanites named Kay says, "I was in a rut, and I was so
inspired by Josh's music," she said. "The first time it went straight through
me -- though my central nervous system." She went online and discovered a
community of like-minded fans and started meeting them in person. Now
she travels all over the country to meet other fans and hear him play. Her
husband, Paul, 47, sometimes tags along wearing a badge identifying him as
a HOG -- husband of a Grobanite.

Around Christmas time another Grobanite was seen delivering a card with a photo of Josh and the greeting, “Merry Joshmas.”

Why? Because God has built into our psychology (through evolution) a desire to be identified with something bigger than ourselves.

Thankfully, God has also provided a more substantial foundation for Christian fellowship than the adoration of pop music icons. The foundation is the Living Stone, Jesus of Nazareth.

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “living stone”?

Peter is creating this metaphor from the prophecies of Isaiah about the one who God would send as Messiah to be the cornerstone of the new thing God was building.

But having encountered this Messiah in the person of Jesus, Peter is not content to leave the metaphor on its own. He has a personal connection here because he was once called Simon but Jesus called him “Petros” which means “Rock.”

Peter isn’t going to have Jesus compared to a hardened, unmoving, heavy object. He knows that Jesus is dynamic, fluid, growing, and unpredictable. So if Isaiah’s prophesied cornerstone was Jesus, then he must be a *living* stone.

And Jesus isn’t the only one. We all are made into living stones as we come to Jesus by faith. God builds us like a wall – but not the unbending walls of the temple in Jerusalem or the pagan temples of the countries in Asia minor. God is building us together into a living temple.

Typically, at the center of any temple is a representation of the god who is worshiped there – an idol. These idols, of course, don’t have eyes to see with, or ears to hear with, or mouths to speak with. But in Peter’s mind the temple God is building on Christ the living corner stone is filled with a living spirit – the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God, then, dwells among us as a dynamic community
constituted on the life of Jesus.

What a beautiful and innovative foundation for belonging.

The next passage falls into basically two parts:

6-8, those who do not trust in Christ.

9-10, affirmation of those who do trust in him.

The first part is a difficult reality that we'd rather not deal with.

Why does it have to be that some will not trust in Jesus Christ?

Our family, friends, humanitarians who don't go to church ...

is this the group Peter is talking about?

It's a difficult subject and a huge reason many people want

nothing to do with the church.

Because God has chosen Jesus to be the cornerstone for those who trust in him,
it follows that those who do not trust in this stone will stumble over it.

Does God want people to disobey?

Is Peter telling us that God has predetermined each person's choices?

No – what God has predetermined is that
those who disobey will stumble over Christ.

Other kinds of associations can be simply navigated around:

if you want to be a Swifty or a Grobanite, great.

But if not, you don't have to justify that to anybody.

Not so with Christ.

God has predetermined that those who freely choose to reject
the offer of grace through faith in the one God has sent
will never-the-less have to deal with the reality of Christ
who is the cornerstone.

This doesn't make God mean.

It makes God's offer of salvation to all people a genuine offer of salvation.

It is not an arbitrary or spiteful decision on God's part.

In a world where free will has been granted,

and where sin has separated all of creation from the Creator,

the saving death and resurrection of God incarnate is not something
a person can view as optional.

But I also don't think this is a one-time opportunity.

[PAUSE] I think we all stumble over Christ the cornerstone
before being brought to faith and built into the wall of living stones.
We all think we can figure out our own way through life before
submitting to God in faith.
God's gracious intention is that when it's all said and done
everyone will recognize who Christ is
and everyone will be built into the holy temple of God's people.

That may not happen in our earthly awareness but I have faith that God
is able to offer people as many opportunities as they need to accept the truth
in this life and in the next.

In v. 9: Peter offers up four overlapping metaphors for the identity
conferred to those who do not reject Christ:

**“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's special possession.”**

These are the realities that are marked by baptism,
and that we seek to live into as a local body of Christians.
These are the things that require concrete expression
in real relationships in order for us to be transformed by them.

The purpose is clear in the rest of v. 9: **“that you may declare the praises of him
who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”**

We are a people called together for the sake of praise.
This is why we worship on a weekly basis together –
and this is why worship is an integral part of our life the rest of the week.

Your membership in this very church is tangible evidence
of what God has done in calling you out of darkness and into the light.

Being brought into the light means not only that we see things more clearly
but also that the light shines on us, revealing us for who we really are.
There's no point in pretending when the light of God
is shining on you.

Be yourself, warts and all.
Choosing to go the way of grace means freedom to be our true selves.
When we are genuine and open with our true selves
then we can be built together as a living community.

The passage ends with this beautiful line: **“Once you were not a people,
but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.”**

Mercifully, we are now the people of God.

We need not search around for an open lunch table,
or follow pop stars or sports teams or politicians
just to feel like we’re part of something. WE ARE A PEOPLE.

On this cornerstone, God has built an indestructible place of belonging.

This is not an identity that gives us any reason to be proud of ourselves,
but it gives us great reason to be proud of God.

What kind of people is it?

It’s a people composed of everybody.

When Peter says, “Once you were not a people”
who does that pertain to among his original audience?

Not the Jews. They were a people since the call of Abraham!

No, it’s everyone else. All the former “outsiders” who are invited by Jesus
to join the priestly people of God!
Jews and Gentiles alike.

Who are the unexpected outsiders that God is welcoming into the church today?

The church’s life as a unified people who are set apart for God’s purposes
in a way that far surpasses the goals of any earthly kingdom
is striking evidence that we have received mercy.

The constitution of the church around the world brings people
who would otherwise be at each other’s throats
into a united community around Christ shows the world
how much mercy we have received.

When you look around this room,

don’t just see stained glass windows and woodwork. See the people!
And when you see the people, don’t just see individuals.
You are living stones built together into a holy temple.

And we are connected by Jesus: the deepest, most dynamic,
formational cornerstone who is as the foundation for all we say and do.