

McCabe United Methodist Church

October 15, 2009

“Living Stones”

1 Peter 2:1-12

by Pastor Gary Walters

Our lesson today is from 1 Peter, Chapter 2 and I'm going to read verses 1 through 12. "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Instead, like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living stone rejected by people, but chosen by God, and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in scripture it says, 'see I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' Now to you who believe, this stone is precious, but to those who do not believe it also says 'the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone and a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message which is also what they have chosen to do, but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into the wonderful light. Once you were not a people but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy but now you have. Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in this world to abstain from the sinful desires which war against your soul. Instead live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Let me start with a story, a joke actually. A minister, a boy scout and a scientist are all riding in an airplane. Things are going along and suddenly there is a loud explosion and the airplane jolts alarmingly. In just a few seconds the pilot comes staggering out of the cockpit and there is smoke rolling out from behind him. He says "the plane is going down" and he grabs one of the three parachutes on the shelf. He runs over to the hatch, flips open the door and as he is about to jump out he turns over and looks at the three passengers and he says "I know the captain is supposed to go down with the ship but I have a young family and they need me" and he jumps out of the airplane. Well the other three look at each other, the scientist jumps to his feet and he says, "I'm the smartest man in the world and the research I'm doing has the potential of saving thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of lives so I'm not just saving my life but theirs" and he grabs a sack off of the shelf and he jumps out of the airplane. Well the boy scout and the minister look at each other for a second and the minister says, "Well son, I've lived a good life and I know when this plane crashes and I die that I'll go to be with Jesus so you can take the last parachute." The boy scout responds "Shoot

preacher, don't worry about it, the smartest man in the world just jumped out of the airplane with my knapsack."

Looking out for number one doesn't always pay but there is something of that vain running through this passage and running through this church that Peter writes to. The context, Peter is writing to a church that is under pressure. The persecutions have kind of swept through that part of the Roman empire, whom Peter is addressing, and so they have faced persecution from the Romans and the Jews and they are likely to face it again and so Peter is writing this word of encouragement. But not only are they facing this pressure from without, but from one another. We don't know the exact nature of the conflict or the trouble that this church was having, but they were at one another's throats. So, he starts this passage with this very strong command, "rid yourselves of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind," these things that are tearing the fabric of the community, of this church, apart.

After all, these are the people who have claimed Christ, who are filled with the holy spirit, your brothers and sisters in Christ, this new family. That this is the place where the holy spirit dwells and through whom Jesus Christ will make himself known to the world. The interesting part is, though, that Peter doesn't actually go that direction. After giving this command or these admonitions of "quit tearing at each other and basically do no harm". (Those of us who were around last lent are familiar with those, they are John Wesley's rules of holy living, do no harm being the first one, do good one being the second one, and stay close to God being the third.) Well he basically gives them the rule do no harm in that first verse. Instead of going on about how all the wonders that the church is and this community of Christ, he changes direction and he spends most of the passage talking instead about the cornerstone. I think on Peter's part it is very deliberate.

Having given that admonition of do no harm, he then moves into this whole idea of staying close to God, or focusing on God, putting our eyes on him. That it is Christ who is the center of community. It is Christ who binds us together. It is Christ that has drawn us together and without him there is no community and there is no reason to be there in the first place.

Well I have to tell you, sometimes when I'm doing sermon preparation I get a little angry with God at times because he starts meddling and he interrupts my comfortable ideas or my priorities or how I think I should be living out my life as a Christian, or challenging my gripes and my grumbles, and he starts pushing buttons. I had one of those experiences this week. Well, I think Peter is telling this church, and what God

was telling me, is that we serve not because of what someone else is doing. I'm not here because of you, because of your commitment, because of what you give or don't give or what you do or don't do, I'm here because Jesus Christ has called me. I tell you what, it's kind of disappointing, not really, but there is a part if all I have to do is measure up to your holiness, I'm set. Not that you are such lousy Christians or that I'm such a great Christian, don't get me wrong, but if the standard is set by mere human beings, it's easy compared to the fact that I'm called here by Christ and that he is the cornerstone, and the measure, and the pattern, against which my holiness is measured.

So God goes on meddling and it challenges me. It challenges me a lot. As I start thinking about the implications of that, that the pattern, or the call, the bar has been set, not by what you or I do, but by what Christ has done. Here is Jesus, who stepped from the glories of heaven to take on human flesh. We can think of that it's like "ah, it's the nativity and this cute little baby." And yet, on the other hand, this is a cute little baby. He cried and he pooped and he had parents who had to take care of him and all of the stuff that comes with human flesh. Not that it's bad, but it's pretty humble, it's pretty earthy stuff. Coming from the glory of heaven to that because he loved us, he loved you, and he loved me that much. And, I'm called to serve, to give, to love, not because of what you do but because of what Christ has done and is doing.

He didn't just stop there, Jesus was basically born to die. He started as a baby in a manger, but he ended on a cross by saying I love you this much. That, folks, is the cornerstone, the pattern against which our lives, our holiness, our commitment, our love for one another will be measured, and God goes on meddling.

Like I said, I was kind of disappointed because if it is a mere human standard that is more attainable. But, in light of what Christ has done for me, there is no way I can measure up. That is where there is another piece or part of this passage that comes in. You see, the cornerstone really has two functions. There are two responses. For one group, for those who believe, that stone is precious, Peter says, for the group that believes Jesus becomes the foundation of their lives and the model or the pattern to which we aspire. Not that we have to attain that, because Christ sacrificed himself for us, but that is the pattern, the model to which we strive and the goal upon which our eyes are set. Then there is this other group that chooses something else, something less, than surrendering to God and following that pattern. To them Jesus becomes the rock upon which their lives are completely shattered. And Peter doesn't give us any other choice. Not that we are saved by what we do, what we offer to God is a broken spirit that he can shape us as living stones into this place where the holy spirit dwells. Not just me individually, but us as a community, which means I love you, not because of

who you are or what you're going to do or what you've done, but because of what Jesus Christ has done for me. In fact, that means you could be a downright pain in theback, and I will still love you because of what Jesus has done for me. I'll still give, no matter what you do, I'll still give. Not because of what you give or don't give, but because of what Christ has given to me and God goes on meddling. Praise God!

I can imagine the images running through Peter's head as he is writing all of this of the grandeur, the splendor of that Roman architecture that surrounded him and thinking of the precision with which it is constructed. Actually Laura and I had the privilege of going to the Holy Land when we were in seminary and we went to the temple of Artameus at Corinth. There were pillars there. The pillars were made of seven stones, each of those about eight foot tall and bigger around than I could grab. They weighed, I believe the guide said, 30 tons each, so figure out what that is per column. Incredible! The seams on those were so tight and everything fit together so well. An interesting kind of a side note, the tour guide told us to stick our finger underneath this tiny little crack where that pillar met the foundation and you could feel it rock every so gently. She said, the Romans built it that way so that the building would give, give with the weather, give with earthquakes, give with whatever elements came its way. That's why that temple is still standing, largely intact, after 2000 years. It was built with that kind of precision, that kind of ability to breathe. Think of the size of those stones and the skill and the care with which it was crafted. And yet the skill of those Roman masons and stoneworkers is nothing compared with the skill with which Christ is crafting us into his temple, and the place where his holy spirit dwells, inasmuch as we offer back to him a broken spirit, a life that is willing to sway a little, to bend a little, if we are willing to let God work off some of those rough edges.

Verses 11 and 12, Peter very nicely fills out Wesley's three rules, or maybe the other way around. Peter talks about basically doing good, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, (remember the persecution), they see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of his arrival. Our ability to reach out, our ability to affect, our ability to attract others to this place and into the kingdom of God, not just McCabe Church, but into the kingdom, is dependent upon our commitment to Christ and how it is lived out and our love for one another. Not because of what you might do or you might do, but because of what Christ has already done. That's pretty cool., would you pray with me.

Lord, We thank you for your church and that we have the privilege of being a part of it. Help us serve and to give, help us live, according to the pattern that you have given us and because of the love you have shown and poured out upon us, in Jesus name, Amen.