

Pastor's Message – 5/7/23
1 Peter 2:2-10 Psalm 31.36

It wasn't that long ago, perhaps some of you remember, when the Sanctuary roof was leaking, and some Church members patched it, but that water damage left its mark until the roof was resingled and the Sanctuary was repainted. In the meantime, there have been many other repairs and updates to the physical church building and campus.

The Church went off-site last week, and worshipped at the Marsh Haven Nature Center, and, as I was driving over there, I was thinking about how some churches actually rent their worship space and have to set up and take down every week. I know of at least one United Methodist who, because of dwindling membership and resources, cannot fund the necessary repairs on their church building and will have to sell that building and look for new quarters. Our Church buildings, like any other part of the physical world, wear out over time and, even if there are no improvements, they need to be kept up lest they fall down.

So, what do we do when we can't sustain physical structures? Sometimes, Churches can become obsessed with buildings. They confuse the church with brick and mortar. They confuse house with home. If this magnificent house blew down flat in a mighty wind tonight or was consumed by a raging fire, would we still believe that we had a church home?

If, by some fiat of government or insurance company we could not rebuild, would we still believe we are church? If we couldn't come into this building and do what we always do in the name of church, would we know what else to do in order to be church?

In the portion of his first letter which we heard today, Peter suggests an answer. He says, in verse 5, "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." One of the verses in hymn #558, "We Are the Church" reads, "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people." These stones that Peter talks about, which are us, become "living" by coming to the Cornerstone, who is Jesus. That's where they -- we -- find out where we fit into God's design.

That's what the words say, but, according to most surveys, church attendance, at least in the northern hemisphere, is dropping off. And a growing number of people are saying that they like Jesus but not the church. More and more people are saying that they are "spiritual" but not "religious." Belonging, to anything, has dropped off precipitously in recent decades.

Google" the question "Is it necessary to go to church to be a Christian?" and you will find several sites that urge regular attendance at church. The argument is made 1) by telling what benefits you receive by going to church (fellowship, moral guidance, biblical instruction, opportunities to recharge, spiritual encouragement and so on) and 2) by quoting Scripture (Hebrews 10:25; Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12 and others).

The idea of members making up the church itself is a clear part of our passage from 1 Peter today. Let's be clear, however; we're talking about not just a *living stone* but *living stones*. It's not possible to build a structure with only the cornerstone and one other stone. Or to use Peter's language from this passage, we're not God's own person, but God's own *people*. In fact, except when speaking of the Cornerstone that is Christ, all of the other metaphors in the verses in 1 Peter today are in their plural form. Christian theology is not about "just me and Jesus;" we can't be a Christian without being an active part of Christ's body which is the church.

For many people, coming to Christ awakens a hunger to learn more and go deeper, and even find ways to serve, and those things bring us to church. But even more, they help to *make us* the church. They help us become disciples and followers of Jesus which is a life-long process. Christ asks us to *let* ourselves be built into a spiritual house. That means to function as part of what God is building in this world and for the next world, and it's what he asks us to do. It's telling us that God wants us to be part of a church family where people can meet God.

Being part of a church is similar to the way a broom works. If you have just one strand of straw to sweep your room, you aren't going to get very much accomplished. But if you take a whole bunch of strands of straw and tie them together, then you've got a very effective tool for cleaning your floors.

As a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,” we are called to be effective. We have a purpose. And what is our purpose? That's why we're working on a Mission Statement again. I mentioned them again a couple of weeks ago. There are suggestions posted in the Fellowship Room. Those suggestions were in the newsletter: the 4 B's, the 3 G's, and a reordering of 1 Corinthians 13:13.

Peter lays out our purpose, we are built together like *living stones* in order that we “may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We have been made all of these things—chosen, priesthood, holy, God's own people—so that we may proclaim, through all these things, the mighty acts of Christ. I Peter makes clear here that proclaiming the mighty acts of Christ is part of the purpose of our being made Christians in the first place.

So, what are those mighty deeds, and how are we to proclaim them? They are part of the fact that we who were no people are now God's people, that we who had received no mercy now receive it all the time. We proclaim the gifts of God, the blessings of God, the Amazing Grace God has bestowed on us in the mighty deeds that we do. This Church has long had a monthly donation to the Food Pantry, this month personal care items. It still does funeral luncheons – much appreciated by families. This summer, again, we will assemble and provide free luncheons to the children of the Waupun who might otherwise go hungry. Later this year, there are plans again to ring bells for the Salvation Army at the Piggly Wiggly to share in the ministry of caring for those in need in our area. This Church has paid its apportionments in full for at least 23 of the last 32 years to share in proclaiming the good news of Jesus in Wisconsin and around the world.

All because we are remade in Christ, made into living stones, to proclaim the good news of God's love and forgiveness.

There may be some who don't feel that they have the abilities to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” There are some who would argue with Jesus that you “will do the same works I have done, and even greater works.” Do we trust Jesus that we have that power? In whom or in what do we place their trust? Our own giftedness? Our own resolve? The support of friends and family? In the face of profound life upheaval none of these things, as good as they are, are sufficient. It's really not about us. Jesus makes it clear that trusting in Him is the only way to go.

And then, trusting in Jesus, trusting in God to “Guide [us] and lead [us], as our bulletin cover says, is the way that we are built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.

Once a great order, a decaying monastery had only five monks left. The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time.

The monks always knew the Rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the treetops. As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the Rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot at his hut. When the Abbot explained the reason for his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. *"I know how it is,"* he exclaimed. *"The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."* So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their faiths.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. *"It has been a wonderful visit,"* said the Abbot, *"but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?"*

"The only thing I can tell you," said the Rabbi, *"is that the Messiah is among you."*

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, *"What did the Rabbi say?"* *"He couldn't help,"* the Abbot answered. *"The only thing he did say, as I was leaving was that the Messiah is among us. Though I do not know what these words mean."*

In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi's words: The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one of us is the Messiah? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me.

He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah?

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

Earlier in this worship service, we sang *We are God's People*. We sang that we believe that the Lord is *more precious than silver* and the Lord is what we desire most. We asked God to *lead us and guide us*. And we *call upon the Lord* who is worthy to be praised for that guidance.

We come to Jesus to be built into a spiritual house to do great things.

Do we believe it? Do we believe that the followers of Jesus can do even greater works

than what Jesus himself did? Do we believe that each person sitting in this church building or off-site is a living stone, gifted to do great things?

The church is the body of Christ that continues to be in the world, continues to speak the words he spoke to all the generations, and continues to do the works that he did while he was on this earth. Just as the Spirit of God came and dwelled on earth for a time in the person of Jesus Christ, so the Spirit of God now dwells among the people of the church that was established in his name.

Think about the earliest disciples and how, after Jesus ascended, they started teaching people what he had taught. They told anyone who would listen what Jesus had said. And they started laying hands on people just as Jesus had done and offering healing in the name of Christ.

Just as Jesus had done, they preached good news to the poor. They healed the sick. They visited those who were in prison. They took care of the widows and the orphans and the hungry and the lame. They invited the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors and the other cast-off members of society to be a part of their community.

The amazing thing about this is that because there were so many of them, they were able to go to many different communities and speak the words of Jesus to many different populations. Some of the disciples traveled around to faraway places to bring the good news to increasing numbers of people all over the Roman Empire.

We know the rest of the story because the good news of Jesus Christ has made it all the way down through all these generations so that his words have been spoken to the ears of the people sitting in this church and off-site, and his healing works have been demonstrated for their eyes, and his grace has been poured out on their hearts. That same Spirit has come to dwell in this community of faith, so that you are now proclaiming his words and doing his works right here in your own community.

There are amazing things that are happening in and through this Church that “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” People who hear of those and experience will want to come and live in that light and shine that same light to others once they have seen it.

One church magazine printed a list called “Spirit killers.” You know those phrases: “We’ve tried that before. . .” and “We don’t have enough people,” “We don’t have enough money,” “We don’t have enough . . . whatever.” That’s how we kill vision and spirit and that’s the opposite of “proclaim[ing] the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

If we believe that we are “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” if we allow ourselves be built into a spiritual house,” if we allow ourselves to be led and guided by God’s Holy Spirit, we will do the same works [Jesus] ha[s] done, and even greater works.” The famed American Puritan revivalist Jonathan Edwards suggested that, as a royal priesthood we offer the same sacrifices that Jesus did: Offering our heart, sacrifices of praise, obedience, and giving love away freely, all with a flaming heart (*Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 942-943).

That is how we proclaim the saving power of Jesus and call people out of darkness into light. May the broom that is this Church burst into flames at its heart that people may see the good that we do and give glory to God.