

"Let Yourself Be Built into a Spiritual House"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 10, 2020

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Holy Scriptures: 1 Peter 2:2-10

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^[a] 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^[b] 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,^[c] 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.

Footnotes:

- a. 1 Peter 2:5 Or *you yourselves are being built*
- b. 1 Peter 2:6 Or *it*
- c. 1 Peter 2:9 Gk *a people for his possession*

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

My Georgia preacher buddy Bob Browning now lives in Kentucky. He shares that a former high school classmate of his is now a grandmother.

She posted a story on Face-Book about the day
she had her 4-year-old grandson with her
when she dropped by a local funeral home
for visitation with the deceased's family.

The little boy took in everything, from the flowers to the casket to the mourners.
Afterward, as they walked outside, he looked up at his grandmother and asked,

"Was that man dead?"

"Yes, he was."

"Did you tell the family you were sorry?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you kill him?"

Clearly, the child assumed that saying you are sorry
is necessitated by having done something wrong,
especially something terribly, terribly wrong.

As we grow up, as we mature in age and experience,
we hopefully also mature in wisdom and spirit,
like this charming four-year-old will.

As we mature, we evolve to have fuller, deeper understandings of faith and forgiveness.

As we form a deepening spirituality,
there are those who help to build up the temple
in which we move and have our being.

A key learning of our spiritual formation is that we are interconnected.

God creates a single spiritual household,
one built on the cornerstone that is Jesus Christ,
fills it to overflowing with the Holy Spirit,
and invites us all to belong.

We are going to explore the meaning and essence of God's beloved community.

Who has helped you to build a spiritual household?

Who has modeled for you the essence of Christian community?

Is there someone in your sphere of influence

with whom you'd like to share the many blessings of your Christian community?

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

We start with the Word,
with God's Word for a hungry and thirsty and worthy world.

First Peter is a missive of hope delivered to Christians,

particularly Christians who are isolated, suffering, set apart,
displaced, dispossessed, disoriented,
bright folks suddenly unsure of the future or what it holds for
them,
a people seeking to be faithful
in the midst of terrible suffering
yet holding fast to a deep and abiding faith.

Sound familiar?

God spoke to our spiritual forebearers.

God is still speaking.

We are listening.

Our ears and hearts and minds are wide open.

The Word of God speaks to us, delivering a word of hope

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^[a] into a spiritual house,
to be a holy priesthood,
to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."*

This is a remarkable yet often misunderstood passage of scripture.

We tend to focus too much on being royal priests and not enough on belonging to God.

We find this often appears in discussions of the priesthood of all believers...

However, in this context, of First Peter,

this passage introduces the notion of a "household of God." ^[1]

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house."

[Also translated: *"You yourselves are being built into a spiritual house."*]

First be built into a spiritual house,

then -- and only then -- the Spirit may make of you a holy priesthood.

The biblical author underscores the importance of this motif,
the idea of the unity of believers in a single household. ^[2]

Understanding Jesus Christ as the living stone,

believers are to see themselves as living stones, as well,
living stones whom God builds into a single, spiritual house. ^[3]

While such stones may be rejected or ignored or cast aside by the world at large,
these living stones will be affirmed by God,

living souls chosen and precious, called to become one community,
one people, a royal priesthood.

If it wasn't for this spiritual household, we might never have known Isabelle Herbig. Isabelle Herbig was a saint in our midst. She was gentle, wise and witty. When she was 93 years young, she shared with us what she overheard in her backyard. Her next-door neighbor was entertaining her grandson. The boy said, "*Grandma, do you still go to church school?*" She said, "*Yes, I do.*" "*Gee, Grandma, I thought you would have learned it all by now!*"

We have much to learn, and much to share.

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

Listen, First Peter insists:

these terms serve to underscore the collective nature of the community.

The Greek word for community is *koinonia*.

Fellowship.

Communion.

Sharing in common.

Spiritual household.

"*Koinonia* is a Greek word that occurs 20 times in the Bible.

Translated as fellowship, the first occurrence of *koinonia* is Acts 2:42:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Christian fellowship is a key aspect of the Christian life.

Followers of Jesus Christ are to gather together, serve together, commune together in love, faith, and encouragement.

The Good News is that the author of First Peter recognizes that sometimes, oftentimes, in these times,

God's people are experiencing collective trauma;

we suffer; we are displaced and isolated;

we may feel more disconnected than connected.

So, the Good News is that God's builds a single spiritual household

in which we are nurtured and nurture one another.

God created a spiritual village in which we encourage and lift each other up.

We are now a household created by God, built on Christ,

filled with the Spirit...and you and you and you.

"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."

In Philippians 2:1-2, the Apostle Paul declares:

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ,

*if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit,
if any tenderness and compassion,
then make my joy complete by being like-minded,
having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."*

Our koinonia with each other is based on our common koinonia with Jesus Christ."^[4]
Think about it:

Thanks to the grace of God, healing happens *in community*.
In community, we discover our connection to God and one another.
Mercy and justice are made real in the context *of community*.
And when justice is not done, when justice is denied, we *the community* know it.

On this Mother's Day our hearts go out to the Georgia family of Ahmaud Arbery
who was a victim of senseless violence and hate.

He was guilty only of Running While Black.

Our hearts reach out to all our neighbors
whose children died too young.

Our souls connect us with the Mothers of the Disappeared,
whose children were killed or "disappeared" around the world.

Our minds connect us with the Mothers of the Disappeared,
whose children were killed or "disappeared" around the world.

Our ears resonate with the words of the teenager from Florida
after witnessing her school shooting.

She said, "*Love me more than you love your guns.*"

May we learn to love one another more than we worship at the idol of fear,
Let's learn to see each other as a child of God,
for "once we were no people, but now we are God's people."

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

*"If you are a mom, if you raised a child, if you nurtured a child,
if you cared for someone else's child, then I thank you today and I honor you.*

*In Disciples congregations, children are dedicated as babies
and then are baptized when they reach the age of decision.*

*Betty and I remember that we were serving as associate pastors in Dallas, Texas,
when our first child was born.*

At about 3 or 4 months of age, we had him dedicated.

On a bright Sunday morning, our senior pastor walked him around the sanctuary.

Dr. Michael Mooty said, "Henry, this is your family.

They will love you and care for you and teach you the faith."

And, then he reminded us brand new parents

that we can't raise a child alone, that it takes a village.

And he was right.

*It took more than just us – it took neighbors and teachers,
grandparents and babysitters, family friends and kinfolks
to show him (and, later, our daughter)
how to be a responsible, caring, and compassionate person.
Yesterday, our son received his Master of Divinity degree.
Betty and I can guarantee you there were many nurturers along the way.
We couldn't and we didn't do it alone.*

*Today – and every day! -- we honor all the women
who mothered and shaped our children – and your children –
in ways that, perhaps, we could not alone.^[5]*

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

First Peter affirms that our social identity is grounded in being a spiritual household.^[6]
In Christ, God creates a place for those who have none
Once you were no people; now you are God's people.
Here in the Church you have a name, an identity, a place at the Table.
Here in this spiritual household you shall taste and see that the Lord is good.

First Peter affirms that the spiritual household is linked with Jesus Christ, forever.^[7]
Our spiritual house is not a social club.
We do not exist solely for the needs and wants and interest of our members.
We are not a museum of saints.
We are a hospital for sinners.
We are a reverent people acknowledging God as the head and Christ as the
cornerstone.
We are here by virtue of God's mercy and nothing else.

First Peter affirms that all who belong to the spiritual household have a new standing.^[8]
No longer are we outcasts or rejects, displaced or dispossessed.
In Christ all are invited to belong,
and by belonging you and I are "chosen and precious in God's sight."

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

My in-laws have taught me much about faith and forgiveness, about life and love.
Nancy Brewer is a teacher of teachers; each one, teach one.
Don is a philosophical preacher.

They shared with me a story about the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.
The Nuclear Regulatory Commission brought together a panel of experts
from a variety of fields to consider what the NRC should do
about nuclear waste which remains radioactive for 10,000 years.

The NRC pointed out to the panel that we can warn people today about where plutonium is stored.

How do we warn people 10,000 years from now?

The experts considered different types of walls and fences, then realized that they fall and wear out over time.

Posted warning signs?

Languages evolve and change and are forgotten.

Governments and royal dynasties, as well,

often do not last more than a few centuries, at best.

At last the panel hit upon a solution which might last for ten millenniums: a priesthood.

A priesthood created and empowered for such a purpose

would believe in the importance of its message,

share its message with the wider world,

and ensure its message passed on from generation to generation.

Neither the NRC nor the panel of experts followed through.

You see, a priesthood is created out of an experience of the holy.

To be a holy priesthood one must believe in something greater than the self.

In addition, the experience of the holy must be experienced

by each succeeding generation.

At the core of an encounter with the holy

is the gift of God's love, which forms us into a single spiritual household.

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house"

We know a priest who valued and affirmed a holy priesthood of believers.

The late Archbishop Oscar Romero preached on January 27, 1980:

*"I repeat what I told you once before when we feared
we might be left without a radio station:*

God's best microphone is Christ,

and Christ's best microphone is the church,

and the church is all of you.

Let each one of you, in your own job, in your own vocation

*-- nun, married person, bishop, priest, high-school or university student,
workman, laborer, market woman --*

each one of you in your own place live the faith intensely

and feel that in your own surroundings

you are a true microphone of God our Lord."

We are living stones living the faith intensely.

As living stones who belong, who are chosen,

who are built by God into a spiritual household with Christ as the cornerstone,
we call ourselves Disciples of Christ.

This is a way of being.
Christianity is not a religion -- it's a relationship.
The Church is more than any building – it is a movement.
The Body of Christ is not closed – all are welcomed home in this spiritual household.
You, me, we all belong – not because we want to know more about God –
we belong because we want *more God*.
If that is truly the case, if you really want more God in your life, in your community,
then let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] Beverly Gaventa, et al, Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A. Westminster John Knox Press. 1995. P. 295.

^[2] Gaventa. P. 295.

^[3] Gaventa, P. 296

^[4] “Koinonia” *God Questions? Website*: <https://www.gotquestions.org/koinonia.html>

^[5] Excerpt from Mother’s Day Meditation by the Rev. Betty C. Brewer-Calvert, May 9, 2020. Adapted.

^[6] Gaventa. P. 296.

^[7] Gaventa. P. 296.

^[8] Gaventa. P. 296.