

May 14, 2017

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Message: Living Stones

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When I was a child I really enjoyed the story of The Three Little Pigs. You remember how it goes. Little Pig #1 built a house made of straw. Little Pig #2 built a house made of sticks. Little Pig #3, more practical and with bigger vision, built a house made of bricks. Neither Little Pig #1's or #2's houses could withstand the huffing and puffing of the big, bad wolf, and they came tumbling down. Only Little Pig #3's house of brick was strong enough to stand against the foul intentions of the Big Bad Wolf.

This familiar children's tale is reminiscent of the very real architectural challenge being experienced by Bath Abbey, located in Bath, England. Bath Abbey was originally built as an Anglo-Saxon monastery in 757AD. The original building was destroyed by the Normans and rebuilt as a massive Norman cathedral in 1090. The current Gothic cathedral was built over 500 years ago, on the remains of that Norman cathedral. Today it is an Anglican church.

The architectural challenge comes, not from it having a foundation of straw or sticks, but from the bones of the estimated 6,000 people that have been buried just below the stone flooring of the church buildings for 1000 plus years. Over time, as the graves settled, holes opened up beneath the floor, threatening the very stability of the building. Today, the likelihood that the floors could collapse beneath the feet of someone about to recite the Lord's Prayer on any given Sunday morning is very real and unsettling. Extensive stabilization efforts are currently underway to stabilize the historic church building.

As Brian and I were starting to look for houses out here, we were all caught up with decisions like...do we want a log or stucco exterior? We need main level living. We want an open space design. Wood floors. A wood burning fireplace. All those aesthetics. But the reality is, the critical bit of any building, whether it's a house or a cathedral, is the bit you don't see. Without a good, solid foundation no building will last long.

Back in ancient times, the cornerstone of a building was the first masonry to be set in the foundation. That cornerstone was critical to the whole building project, because the stability of the whole building rested on it. If it was cracked or out of true, the building would, ultimately, come tumbling down.

The author of 1 Peter is drawing on such architectural imagery in our passage today. He is writing to a broad group of new churches, Christian believers dispersed over Asia Minor. Believers trying to figure out how to live out their faith within social and religious contexts that were not only opposed to their newfound faith, but were increasingly becoming dangerously opposed to it. As they were trying to figure out who they were as people of faith, who they were supposed to be as a church within their particular context, the author was telling them (and also reminds you today) "Remember your Cornerstone. Remember that your faith, and your life, rests and relies on Christ. On God. And on the priorities of God. More so, remember that the Cornerstone doesn't stand isolated. You, in fact, are the living stones that

give structure to God's church. As you learn this, as you grow into the spiritual house that God is calling you to be, discern what you need to let go of...what needs to be thrown out because it's no longer useful. Discern what you need to hold on to...what needs to be kept, because it keeps you vital as God's people. Discern what new thing must be cultivated to grow into who God calls you to be as living stones."

The author of 1 Peter was speaking to the importance of allowing yourselves to be shaped together for the walls to be built up. Co-operation with one another is the very business of building Christian fellowship. The author challenges you to ask yourselves, "In what ways do you either enhance or sabotage the co-operation required to become 'living stones' and build a vital church together?"

UCSJ is facing a time of change, a time of building, again. And though this can be an anxious time, this time of change also brings an opportunity to draw closer to God. To discern who God wants you to be, and how God wants you to grow and become as a church together. It is a time of discernment. What does being "living stones" mean for you here, as The United Church of the San Juans in Ouray County? A united church. A united people. You must discern. What do you toss out? What do you keep? What do you add? How do you grow? How do you become stronger? And I don't just mean in numbers. I mean as a Body that is guided by and reflects the radical, all-encompassing, never-failing love and grace of God in Ouray County and beyond.

I am encouraged by the number of you who have expressed interest in serving on the pastor search team, or to help and support the PST as they do their important work on behalf of the church. I am thankful for your leadership that is willing and intentional about approaching this process in a healthy way. They want your feedback. They need to hear your priorities for UCSJ and your new pastoral leader, and they are developing ways and means to give you opportunities to give your feedback. Don't be reticent. Speak up. They need to hear from you...and they are committed to listening.

As you move into the process, however, remember this. Keep your Cornerstone FIRMLY in place. Christ is the Cornerstone of UCSJ. God and God's priorities should always come first. Be living stones in this place that pulse with the life-giving love of God for all people. God doesn't get hung up on small details...what hymns or music you sing, how much liturgy is included in the service, whether the pastor wears robes or not. Those are just minutiae. And everybody has different opinions about those sorts of things. What God cares about is if you reflect the way of Christ, the heart of God to one another and beyond the walls of this church building, to those who may not experience God's love and mercy in their lives. What God cares about is if you put the needs of others before yourself.

Last weekend the ELCA held their annual assembly, which, in this 500th anniversary year of Martin Luther's Reformation, centered on celebrating ecumenical unity. The Graffs and I had the pleasure of presenting UCSJ - your history, your model, your ethos - at the assembly. During my introduction, I spoke of my experience coming here. I said, what I saw in UCSJ's history, its priorities, its ethos, is a body of believers that value something more than

doctrine and church polity. You value the living Christ that calls all people into loving relationship, first with God, then with each other.

I told them that one of my favorite John Wesley quotes comes from his sermon, "A Catholic Spirit." Wesley was preaching from 2 Kings 10:15, which reads. "And when he left there, [Jehu] met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him, and he greeted him, and said to him, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?"* And Jehonadab answered: "It is." [Jehu said], "If it is, give me your hand." Pulling from just a few words from Wesley's rich, insightful sermon, he said, "But even though a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without doubt, we may...Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight. "If your heart is as my heart," if you love God and all mankind, I ask no more: "give me your hand."¹

When I originally read UCSJ's profile and the mission statement...then when I actually met you, came here to live among you, I knew that...whether you realized it or not...it was in this same spirit that you came together to form a very special, very unique church in Ouray County. A church that I still like to call a microcosm of the Body of Christ.

As you explore your future, make this commitment. Be living stones. Let God lead you. Always. When you do, UCSJ will always be the breath of fresh air and loving reflection of God's grace that is so important here in Ouray County. You are a special people. A special and unique church. As you search for your new pastor and dream of your future, don't get hung up on details that divide. Let the way of Christ guide you. You will flourish and thrive...and in your lives together, God will be honored. God's house will stand here.

Let us pray. Immovable God of grace, I admit for me, and I think I speak for most everyone here...change is hard. It brings heartache. It brings uncertainty. It even, if I'm honest, shakes our faith a little. But now is when we need our faith to dig deep. Be resolute. Unshaking. And we ask your help in that. As my dear friends here seek your guidance for the future. As I step into a new direction that I neither anticipated nor desired just a few short weeks ago. We ask for your strong, unshaking, loving hand to guide us. Help us to move forward with anticipation. Excitement. Passion. Because where you lead, and when we willingly say "yes" and follow...even when it isn't what we expected, we can trust that we are a part of something special and good. So, we say "yes." And we say "lead." And we say "use us." And we say "to your glory, always." Amen.

¹ <http://www.crivoice.org/cathspirit.html>