

ALL IN THE FAMILY A SERMON ON I PETER 2:4-12

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

A few weeks ago, I was coming into church and found this piece of paper folded and stuffed into the fence on the 8th street side of our building. In very neat handwriting, I found these words “I’m scared. I hope you come soon.”

I wish I knew what was going on with the person who wrote this note — Who were they? What are they scared of? Who do they have to turn to? I imagine that the anxiety in this note is not uncommon. What do we do in the early morning hours when we wake up and feel so alone? In the late evening hours when we face the darkness and the secret fears and the demons that taunt at our brains, the technicolor carnival of distractions only satisfies for so long before we have to face the fear of a world that seems so against us — what do we do? Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, was also a poet. One of his lesser known poems reads like this: “A man said to the universe ‘Sir, I exist’. ‘But’, replied the universe, ‘that does not create in me a sense of obligation.’” So many feel that very same isolation and aloneness.

Peter, in this first letter of his, shows how we are not alone. The past two weeks, we’ve seen how Peter establishes our identity as being God’s own people — in a special relationship with him. That identity gives us grounds to live lives of holiness, which we saw last week meant restraining our impulses toward evil and indulging our instincts for the good. Our new identity as God’s children and our calling to holiness are sufficient reasons enough not to be overwhelmed by the isolation and loneliness. Because we are in a faith relationship with God, we are never alone — even in the most trying circumstances. This intimacy with God is beautifully explored in Psalm 139:1-4, 11-12. It’s a wonderful assurance. Sometimes God wakes me up in the middle of the night and I can’t get back to sleep — it’s taken me a while to realize that God intends me to pray during those times. So, now I get up and pray — I confess, I thank God, I pray for my family and friends, I pray for all of you, I pray for specific people who God brings to mind. And then I pray my way through scripture. This is a terrific Psalm to pray your way through. Read a verse or two — and stop and chew on it and pray it back to the Father.

But God created us not just to be in deep relationship with Him, but also one another. God hasn’t called us together here as individuals, but as a group — as a body. We have the myth of the rugged individual hero — the Lone Ranger, John Wayne riding off into the sunset, Clint Eastwood as the gunfighter with no name. We have this idea that our heroes are tough men who can handle any situation on their own and can stand on their own. But in reality, we’re not made that way. We are made to rely upon and trust in one another. We’re made

to lean on one another and to bless and be blessed by one another. Today's passage reflects that design. From today's passage, we get two pictures of our life together — we are a family with a foundation and we are a people with a purpose. With that in mind, let's dig into the text.

As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by men 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."^[1] Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,
"The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone,"^[2] ^[3] and,
"A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall."^[4] They stumble because they disobey the message —
which is also what they were destined for.

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 his 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 received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 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.

First, we see that we are a family with a foundation. Look at verses 4 -5. Here Peter uses the metaphor of us being living stones brought together to be built into a "spiritual house". In other words, God brings us together and joins us together into a structure. The key thing in this picture is the foundation of the structure: Jesus. Here Jesus is referred to as the chosen and precious cornerstone. The cornerstone in ancient times was the most important stone in architecture — it was a foundation stone that held the pressure where two walls joined. So we are quite literally built on the foundation of Jesus.

Peter brings together these three Old Testament Quotes, all of them talking about the coming messiah — the king who would deliver Israel. The thrust of these passages is that we either come to the stone in faith, or we are broken against the stone in rebellion.

Peter learned this use of the OT passages from a pretty good teacher. Jesus in Matthew 21 makes the same point using one of the same passages. Jesus was in Jerusalem and was being tested by the Pharisees. So he told a story about a landowner who planted a vineyard — he purchased all the equipment and tended the vines until they were ready to produce fruit. And when all was ready, he entrusted the whole operation to some tenants so he could go off on other business. When the time came that he should be expecting the first bottles, he sent one of his people back to see what kind of return he was getting on his investment — perhaps even to get a bottle of the early pressing. The tenants just abused this messenger. He sent another messenger — no answer. And another. Finally he sent his only son - his beloved boy. And do you know what those tenants did? They killed the boy, abused his body, and left it out in the open for the crows. What did the owner of the vineyard do? He roused up all his security forces and destroyed the wicked tenants and found new tenants. After telling this story, Jesus then quotes “Haven’t you read the scripture: The stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

Jesus is the son — He is the one that God sent, and by rejecting Him, he becomes the stone against which we are broken. In Matthew 21:44, Jesus said “He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

So we’re joined together as a family through our faith in Christ. Now being a part of a family is a wonderful thing. We get that sense of connection and intimacy. We have that sense of togetherness, like we can rely upon one another and take our hurts and cares for one another. However, like all families, it can also be maddening. I am the youngest of three children. My sister is ten years older and my brother is six years older. You can imagine that this was a recipe for disaster. Once, my brother Jack and I were on the school bus coming home when he got on a fight on the bus. When we were let off at the stop and were walking home, Jack said “Russell, we’re not going to tell mom about this, OK?” I looked up with my very innocent little face and said “No, of course not.” But when I got home, what’s the first thing I did? “Mom, guess what — Jack got in a fight on the bus!” And my sister Alison was not exempt from life with little brother — I met her boyfriend Bill at the door and said, “There’s a guy trying to steal your girlfriend, and his name’s Larry.”

Life as a family can be maddening at times. That’s why it’s so important that we are a family with a foundation. With Christ as our cornerstone, we have security. Even when we let one another down, even when we drive one another crazy, we are still secure in Jesus Christ. Why, because our relationship is not based on what we do for one another, rather our relationship is based off of the fact that Christ has put us here together for a reason. Being a family with a

foundation means that Christ has measured each one of us up and put each one of us here in this time and in this place. It doesn't matter if you're a member of this congregation or not. Being a member of the family has little to do with official membership and everything to do with Jesus Christ. God brought you here among us today. God has a purpose for you — and that leads us to our second picture.

We are also a people with a purpose. We get this picture in verses 9-12. Here, the compelling image is that of being a kingdom of priests — remember that the priests were those who offered the sacrifices in the temple; they were the ones who stood between the people and God. God's vision was always that the whole church would be a kingdom of priests — that we would all be in direct relationship to him and serving one another. Back up in verse 5, we see that we are to offer “spiritual sacrifices” — these spiritual sacrifices are what David talks about in Psalm 51:16-17. A broken and contrite heart. Our spiritual sacrifice is our own heart, our very own being offered up to God.

From this broken heart arise two main things that we do together as priests. And again, remember that the picture here is that we do these things not in isolation, but together. Praise in verse 9, Good works in verse 12. So we are called to these positive works of praise and good works together. That's why we have worship together on Sundays and Wednesdays. That's why we have programs like Service Saturdays where we tangibly show the love of Jesus Christ.

Now the important thing to realize is that fulfilling our purpose does not rely upon an organization or institution — it is a spiritual fellowship. In a very real way these pictures work on two levels — we are spiritually connected with all Christians in all time and place. We are also spiritually connected with everyone in this congregation. If God keeps bringing you back here week after week, it doesn't matter if you're on our membership rolls or not, he has a plan for you here. Each one of you is here for a reason. You've been brought here by God to help this congregation fulfill the twin purposes of praise and good works. As we live out our mission of changing the world through worship, witness, study, sharing, and serving, each one of you has a part to play. The challenge for you is discovering that part.

This week, we started a new initiative called Prayer Vigil. We have two people sequestered away in a room just off this sanctuary and they have been praying the whole time that the Holy Spirit would do great things in our lives. This idea is founded in the belief that it doesn't matter how good the preaching is or how wonderful the music is or how beautiful the sanctuary is — they are just tools used by the Holy Spirit to work on hearts. We have another group of people who work as our ushers — they sacrifice their enjoyment of the worship service to greet people, answer questions, and help make this a comfortable

space — they don't do this because it's a task that needs to be done. They do it because God can work through their ministry to touch lives. We have homebound people who can't make it to worship on a regular basis — but their ministry of prayer supports this entire congregation. Some of you are called to be leaders and organizers of ministries we haven't even thought of. Others of you are called here to help us take our existing ministries to new levels. Realize also that this church's ministry isn't limited to the official programs of our organization. Some of you do ministry through developing relationships in your neighborhood or at the workplace. Some of you are gifted at one on one discipleship and are even now taking someone to a deeper understanding of faith. Some of you are not sure yet why God has brought you here — perhaps it is for healing some hurt in your life so you can engage in the adventure of faith. Perhaps God brought you here so you can make a new commitment to studying the scriptures and knowing him better. Perhaps you are a visitor from another congregation and God brought you here today to renew your commitment to that other congregation.

I've said it many times before, we are not a collection of people who share the same space for an hour on Sunday — we are a people. What is your calling as a part of this people? We have a purpose that we are living out together. What is your role in fulfilling that purpose? God has given you unique gifts, interests, and passions. How are you going to use them?

Finally, we are a family with a foundation. Jesus has brought each one of us together. A people with a purpose. Jesus brought us here for a reason. When I do wedding counseling, I tell the couple that they are quite literally God's gift to one another. God is going to use your spouse, with all their talents and all their faults, to do a good work in you. In the same way, we are God's gift to one another. Look around. These people are God's gift to you. Now let's go be the church together. Amen.