

## **Cornerstone**

Menno Mennonite Church  
May 3, 2026

**Purpose:** To celebrate the cornerstone of Christ on which all else is based.

**Message:** God's Spirit lays a new foundation for us to build the kingdom that we are invited into.

**Scripture:** 1 Peter 2:2-10 [sermon text; I will read]; Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

**Synopsis:** We all seek to belong to something. Knowing where we fit in the world and that we have those like us are basic human needs. We long for the reassurance of finding our "home" be that in a social, political, or work context. Sometimes, we can allow church to stand in for that need of belonging only, valuing the promise of connection as much, if not more than we value the meaning of our connection, and its sole value: identity within and through the promises of Jesus Christ. We have become a people through the common experience of encountering the way of Christ and following it to the best of our ability. It is in that we find our meaning, our hope, and freedom from our fears.

## 1 Peter 2:2-10

<sup>2</sup> Instead,  
like a newborn baby,  
desire the pure milk of the word.

Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation,  
<sup>3</sup> since you have tasted that the Lord is good.

<sup>4</sup> Now you are coming to him as to a living stone.

Even though this stone was rejected by humans,  
from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable.

<sup>5</sup> You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple.

You are being made into a holy priesthood  
to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable  
to God through Jesus Christ.

<sup>6</sup> Thus it is written in scripture,  
*Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable.*  
*The person who believes in him will never be shamed.*

<sup>7</sup> So God honors you who believe.  
For those who refuse to believe, though,  
the stone the builders tossed aside has become the capstone.

<sup>8</sup> This is a stone that makes people stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.  
Because they refuse to believe in the word, they stumble.  
Indeed, this is the end to which they were appointed.

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,  
a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession.

You have become this people so that you may speak  
of the wonderful acts of the one  
who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.

<sup>10</sup> Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people.  
Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We have a passion for variety in our country. Above all, in the midst of the choices and means that we have open to us, I think we value choice above almost anything else. We love our choices, and draw our identity from them. Preferring Red to Green or the other way around in the fields going to be a point of pride and debate. We have our routines: Coke over Pepsi, the car we drive that makes sense to us, our preferred uncomfortable airline, and on and on it goes. Now we can even debate what we carry in our pockets and whether an iPhone really makes such a difference. Whatever it is, I think it is the choosing that matters. America may not have invented the buffet, but there is little doubt that it has reached its fullest expression here. We want the choice to be different. During my time in China one of the tasks we were given was to be simply in conversation with English speakers regularly to expand their facility with English Language. Arriving there I was a profound disappointment to them when they discovered that I did not fit the mold that they knew Americans by: big car driving with big attitudes and a passion for Michael Jackson. It was the lifestyle they saw so it was what they expected, and my trying to explain at that time only 6 years after Tiananmen that some people do, and some people don't was a tough concept for them to wrap their heads around. Speaking of individual identity to a culture that values consistency is a big task. Describing and us, whatever the US happens to be, always demands a healthy dose of footnotes.

Yet within the individualization that we enjoy there also exists a strong need to belong. Perhaps the downside of personalization is that we don't always know what to do with our freedoms, and need largely to belong. We revere the things that do bind us together and it stresses us out to see the divisions and entrenchment deepen in our world. Most of the time we find our clans by the trivialities of what binds us: our affiliations and our likes. We are way more hesitant to take it to the next level and find the bigger commonalities that are ours—like claiming the name of Christ. We are far more aware of what divides us than what binds us. We see it all around us and we can quickly grow scared of the isolation, alienation and radicalization that accompanies it.

On this level, we share a world with the original hearers of this letter to the church. Theirs was a world of choice—prescribed often by caste and role, to be sure, but choice all the same. They may not have had the multiplicity of options that we do today, but they we certainly bringing the issue of identity to the life of the church. These congregations were pockets of shared identity in a strange land. The church was growingly Gentile at this point, but there was

still a strong sense and flavor of Jewish culture to go with it. They had retained a great number of the rituals and rules for the celebration, but they no longer fit into the Hebrew culture. They had grown past the charismatic moments of Pentecost and the early church, and now they needed to find identity in the place where what had long defined their identity had been severed because they were part of the church. They got the language of being strangers in a strange land. Neither Roman, fully, or Jewish entirely, or part of whatever other systems that they had known in the past as they abandoned the rituals that went with them, they were trying to make something new. They are reaching for a new way of being that is based in faith, and held in their new-found identity. They were in a moment of now what, and needed counsel of how to proceed. The counsel is this: know that you are built on the basis of Christ and Christ alone, and be the people in Christ and of Christ that you are called to be because that is what the world needs.

These words and more like them deeply resonated with the early Anabaptists. They were taking on a project of, in their minds, building the church from the ground up to make it new again. They were setting out these same foundations and so they were pulled magnetically to the verses like these that call us into the work of being who and what we are: the church. It is from here that they drew some of the main citations that began to structure what they were wanting to understand the church to be: a body gathered for the purpose and the pursuit of the life of being the people of God.

To some degree we get that. Being Mennonite still means being a bit strange, a bit other. We are not entirely protestant as we tend to be more Christocentric and ethically insistent than some of our sisters and brothers. We are not quite high church either as we have long since left those habits behind. And then there is the image that the name simply brings up for people, steeped in what they have seen of Mennonites as particular others that we end up needing to encounter along the way. Even as we have left many of the outer elements of the tradition behind, we still find ourselves being other. We are trying to do the hard work of being community in a time and society that does not entirely know what do make of the term. There is a difference between the two—between a community and a society. A society is a social order which binds people together in order to establish law, order, and power, maintaining a loose identity only sufficient to promote its own survival. Being a community, as we are, is something different. Community is something that exists for itself, depending on developing and maintaining authentic relationship across difference, despite otherness, and for the sake of the unity of the

whole. Society is a structure built for human control. Community, I think, is a working of the Spirit to even make it possible. The big black mark we carry theologically is that we don't have a well developed understanding of the Spirit and its inspiration. I would argue that the work of the Spirit is the work of establishing the kingdom right here and right now. It is the work of doing community together, and so our notion of the spirit is best reflected in our aspirations for who we want to be as people together: a breathing and living community that by the gifting of the Spirit (it is the Spirit's work, not just ours) goes about being members of the Kingdom of God right now and right away.

This is of course absolutely difficult. We struggle to live up to our best ideals. Our communities break all the time. We fail in love and compassion for each other. We confuse communality of thought, name and food for the community that was meant to be. Our greatest sin is to think of ourselves as God's people not for the quality of the Kingdom realized among us but because of the commonality of the language we carry to bind us. We can have a lot in common, but that is not what makes a community. My dad, a historian and genealogist that he is often gets marvelously frustrated with my rather nonchalant recollection of last names. I generally don't have a great deal of recollection of such details, or comprehension of how it connects. He was always curious who I had met on this camp or at the other meeting, and would be frustrated when I hadn't had the presence of mind to slot the people I would into their proper historical context, or to recognize a 3<sup>rd</sup> cousin if they happened to bite me. I actually take some pride in ignoring some of the cultural markers of Anabaptist thought. There is nothing Mennonite about a pie, or dumplings or quilts or the particular brand of German we happened to speak once upon a time—there is only the faith that wants to follow Jesus. There is nothing wrong with a good round of the Mennonite game, but we can never confuse that with the actuality of being Mennonite; with the actuality of setting Christ as the cornerstone.

But of course this hard. We know how hard it can be to do family sometimes; it is harder still to do community. We know that being community together is rough. We gather together around what we think is important and who we are called to be, but that doesn't keep us from being hurt by the very people we are linked to all the same. If you are going to be in community, you will be hurt sooner or later. Communities fail each other. It is not the goal or the hope, but it is the truth. There is always the need for grace when we remain in community. Writer and Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber speaks of naming this as part of her initiation of church members; hurt

will come, but so too will come healing and reconciliation if you are able to stay engaged long enough to see it through. All of us can recite a litany of pain connected to the church. I wonder how readily we might give a similar recitation of those places where grace has shown its face. As tempting as it is to simply do along to get along, we must remain committed to seeking reconciliation by remaining in relationship long enough to find it, daring much along the way.

The church is many things to many people. It is home, identity, the place that is familiar, comforting, and all the rest. But it is way more important than that too. This is where Christ is to be made known in the world; as messy as that is. Without the cornerstone of Christ, all else is irrelevant fluff. We are being called living stones here as we interact with Christ the cornerstone. That requires much on our part. The cornerstone is what places the foundation of the building, keeping it true, straight and plumb. But anyone who has built anything with stone or brick knows, not much can be accomplished without a great deal of transformation of the building materials along the way. Angles need to be cut. Edges honed. Natural imperfections smoothed. Accommodations made in order to make the structure hold together. It is a process of working, chipping, breaking, and building is ongoing, getting all of the elements to bond together in a way which the structure finds life and stability. The difference between a mere structure and something that lasts is found only in the willingness to be about the work of honing things to make it right.

The church cannot be a place of identity alone; it must always be a place of building and transformation. It cannot be static because this is where the Spirit must live.

May we build one body one people, being bound ever tighter to each other, and inspired to do the good work of living community well, seeking the Lord along the way. Amen.