

Being a People

April 30, 2022

Purpose: To recollect the promise of identity found within the promise of resurrection.

Message: As people brought together in the name of the one corner stone, we are invited to own our identity as people of Christ.

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:2-10 [sermon text]; Acts 2:42-47 [Please Read]

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

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 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 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,
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.

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 and iPhone really makes such a difference. What ever 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.

For all the choice that we have, I dare say it can be a bit lonely. Sure we might have our strains and supporters—those who have made choices and expressed preferences similar to ours. For all of our love of variety and innovation, I think we also carry a deep sense of wanting to belong to something bigger than ourselves. We reverence our shared symbols with awe and solemnity because we are often looking for something to bind us together. We would do well to remember that we are wrapped together to each other in the common good come what may, no matter what we might say about each other and our ideas. For all the promised connectivity of new media and all the rest, we have seen time and again a greater sense of isolation, alienation, and radicalization for it. We know this in our lives, in our politics, and, often, in our churches.

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 abandon 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.

As Emily has pointed out the last couple of Sundays, these texts are the texts of the Anabaptists. The pastoral Epistles—the several letters addressed to the pragmatic issues of being a people—speak with eloquence about being a people in a new, special way. They emphasize a lived and realized faith in the here and now, and construct the vision of what it means to be a Christ Follower above all else. As such they resonated deeply with those seeking to do the same in a different time and different way. 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 maintain authentic relationship across difference, despite otherness, and for the sake of the unity of the whole. Societies use unity to control and maintain; communities seek unity in the midst of relationship and across disagreement many times—and that is a much more difficult task. We do well to remember that within our church both individually and more broadly this is the work that we are doing—remaining in community, not just having enough rules to keep everyone in line.

It is not the easy way. Communities take a lot of work. That is why they are not all that common. We have the best of intentions, our common loves and ambitions for the life of the church, even our shared history, ethnicity and traditions that make us one. We can have a lot in common, but that is not what makes a community. My dad, professional 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 3rd 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—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.

In order to be community, we need to hew to something far greater than any of the individual identities or the preferential choices that we might own as our own. We need something far bigger than that: we need Jesus along the way. Anyone who has lived in intentional community will tell you it is hard, demanding, seemingly impossible work. 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. It is all but a truism that 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. Yet church community and the true work of being the house of Christ together calls us, always, to something bigger, something new. 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 all of the pales in comparison to its truest call and its fullest purpose: to be the place where Christ is known in the world. Without the cornerstone of Christ, all else is irrelevant fluff. Sometimes, we would rather see church as a place to belong, an affiliation and badge to be worn rather than a place where we truly are bound together as one people, as one family, as a chosen priesthood and holy nation as we are called to be. 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 church cannot be a place of identity alone; it must always be a place of building and transformation. No wonder we much prefer the metaphor of a body over the more demanding task of being a house together. Community is hard work, but it keeps bringing us back together to seek Christ together, and to see Christ in the other, even, sometimes, when that other is someone who may have hurt us along the way.

May we build one, 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.