

## “CHOSEN AND PRECIOUS”

1 Peter 2:2-10 May 10, 2020

A nod to Mother’s Day, it seems, Peter in our text today starts with milk, with feeding, with infancy and nurture, with tasting and seeing. What mother doesn’t remember those struggles and those joys? Happy Mother’s Day to all those who help us drink the spiritual milk and help us grow in faith. We are grateful. We are better for it. Thank you.

That said it’s the stones that dominate the thinking in these verses.

Come to the stone, and be a stone, and live inside those stones. Peter gets a little carried away, it seems. He has stones on the brain, I guess. Rocks. Rocky, that’s what they called him. Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter (*Petros*-Rock). Maybe he’s trying to return the favor. Come to the living stone. Come and let him build you into the house he’s trying to build. Be a stone, like him, a living stone, part of the foundation, part of the structure. Be a stone, a temple made of stone. Be a stone sanctuary; let worship take place in you. Make worship take place in you. We’re both the structure and the activity that takes place inside that structure. We’re the building and the worship that inhabits that building. It makes your head spin a little bit, doesn’t it? Which is it? What is it? What are we? Who is he? And what in the world is a living stone? If living water is water that moves, water that bubbles and rushes and flows, what is a living stone?

“Let yourself be built,” Peter pleads with us. “Let yourself.” It’s not for us to decide, to say, “I’m going here; I’m going to hold up this wall; I’m going to frame that window; I’m going to lie on this path.” No, let yourself be built.” Go where he wants you, where he can use you. You’re not in charge; you’re a stone, for heaven’s sake! You’re not the architect; you’re building material. Be built into something greater than yourself, something you may not even see right now. Who knows what you will be? He’s not done with you yet.

But why living stones? Wouldn’t stones that stay put be better?

Wouldn’t stones that are inert be better for building? You don’t want your stone house to be all wobbly. Or worse yet, for the stones to come to life and wander about. That is hardly a secure construction pattern.

Well, that’s why riding metaphors too long gets you into trouble. He’s not giving advice to stone masons; he is helping to build the church. He’s bought this faith thing. God doesn’t want dead weight holding down the pews; God wants living stones who will live and move and grow in the faith! That’s who Christ is calling for; that’s who Christ was.

A stumbling block—now that’s something all good construction grade granite needs to aspire to, am I right? Sure, I want to be the one that stubs toes and bruises knees. Especially when they deserve it. Right? They were just as bad, says Peter. We’re better. We’re royal. We’re part of God’s light show. We’re the ones who received mercy, even though we hadn’t before and even though we were just as bad. Even though we deserved it; even though....Hmmm.

What if Jesus didn’t come to be a stumbling block? What if instead Jesus came to be a stone bridge that leads us from where we are to where we could be, where we’re called to be? Because people are clumsy and sometimes don’t want to move and get satisfied with ruts, they stumble. A better way is before us, and we stumble because it might be better; but it definitely is different. Maybe destined means that as long as we follow our own inclinations, we’re sunk, or limping with bruised and bloody toes. But when we receive the mercy of living differently and once we pledge allegiance to the king and not to the monuments of our own making—however good they may be or seem—then we learn to walk differently.

Peter says, with, it seems, a certain amount of surprise and relief, that Christ chooses to let us be a part of the plan, a part of the structure to build a better kingdom. Come and be built. Come and be alive and participate in something bigger than yourself. Come and grow into something more. To be a priest is to be a go between. We can help usher someone else into a new way of living. We are privileged to partner with the king; that's why we're royal priests, not because we are special, but because he is special. We're just the ones stubbing their toes and knocking their knees. We aren't better than they are; we're just being used for a greater cause than we even knew was out there. It is his mercy that makes us worthy of being a living stone.

The more we can learn about what that means, the more effective and the more complete we will be. The more alive we will be. The more we are willing to set aside our own preferences and patterns for the service of the king, the more we will grow as living stones.

It seems to me that we are living in a time where the opportunities and challenges of "growing as living stones" are numerous and scary. We haven't chosen these changes that have been thrust upon us but we are choosing how we react to them. We are choosing how we adapt and move and that is causing some growth we really didn't anticipate! The old saying "No pain-no gain" seems quite appropriate here but I want to kick and scream and have someone hear that I didn't choose this way of learning and moving and changing. Well, that won't do any good so just like each of you, I am trying to figure it out as I go.

When I first came to Pine Bluffs United Methodist Church there were no banners on the walls and no screens to pull down to do power points. We had to beg and borrow from the School District if we needed their technology. The worship committee and Church Council got busy and we agreed to order new banners and new paraments. We have been blessed by these additions to our worship. And now because of the ramifications of closing the building due to the pandemic, we have had to jump forward into the new technology of "live-streaming" our worship so we can still be together—even if it's virtually!

Would I have willingly chosen to be pushed into this "brave new world"? I didn't even imagine that all of the issues that caused us to do this even existed and I certainly didn't anticipate these changes in the last few months of my ministry here in Pine. But as this Family of Faith and this Body of Christ we are growing in our ministry, in our personal faith, and as a community of believers.

You all amaze me with how you have reached out to each other, to me and to those around you who are in need. Your compassion, your generosity, your caring are such witnesses to your faith and to who you are as "heart-centered disciples." I am so thankful to be a part of this journey with all of you.

Recently I received a "COVID-19 Update from Bishop Karen Oliveto." It was written Monday, May 4. She writes: "It has been a long couple of months, as we all sheltered in place in response to the COVID-19 threat. In fact, social distancing measures worked to help flatten the curve though out the states of the Mountain Sky Conference. I am grateful for all the hard work of clergy and laity throughout our conference, as you learned new skills so that the community of faith could gather virtually...and the vital, life-giving, life-saving ministries could continue throughout our communities. You have done awesome work!! May the lessons learned in these past two months inform future ministries as you share the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others within your community and beyond.

Now, however, comes the difficult work of preparing our communities for the next phase of life in this COVID-19 era.

Throughout the Mountain Sky conference, state, regional, and local authorities are loosening shelter in place restrictions. While we are all eager to return to in-person worship and gatherings, it is critical to look at the specifics of your local regulations as well as CDC recommendations. I continue to recommend a suspension of in-person worship at least through May as we prepare our congre-

gations for the next phase.

The fact is, worship and church gatherings are going to look and feel very different as we return to in-person gatherings.”

As your pastor I am working with church leadership to create a concrete plan for re-entry into our building that meets with the requirements of government and health officials. We are also using this time to reflect on what we have learned about ministry and how to integrate these lessons into our church’s ministry as we return. This moment has allowed us a reset button as we see what ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century entails. I welcome and invite your feedback as we move forward. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

In a recent article in the Cheyenne Tribune titled “ Mom, we want you to be happy, healthy and safe” author Pennie Hunt wrote of her mom’s last years. She described her experiences that I will share with you now. “Mom, we want you to be happy, healthy, and safe.” She scrunched up her face in a mixture of confusion, mistrust and fear. She did not like this conversation. It was an intervention we dreaded. Making a move from being independent and living on your own when you are 86 to a situation where caretakers are required is a difficult transition.

Difficult for my mom. Difficult for her children.

The odd mixture of confusion and fear visited me, as well. Guilt joined right in.

Emotionally, my heart wanted my mom to be strong, beautiful and sound minded until she was 100. Logically, my mind understood the small, frail woman before me needed help.

Her driving had become a rotation of accidents, body shops, insurance rate hikes and relief that that no one was hurt. Her falls had become more and more frequent, as evidenced by the swollen green and blue bump on her forehead that day.

Her memory swayed like a breeze blowing through—at times gentle and kind, with the sweet smell of freshness, and at times as if a harsh wind had cleared any signs of her life from just moments before. Names were lost, appointments missed, bills were not paid.

I wanted her to be Happy, Healthy and Safe. That became my mantra.

Happy, Healthy, and Safe. Happy, Healthy, and Safe.

In the weeks after that initial intervention conversation, we visited a variety of retirement facilities and signed a contract with one.

The process of separating her life into boxes of KEEP, DONATE and THROW AWAY was both physically and emotionally painful. There were clothes three sizes too big for her shrunken frame. Dishes and a tea pot collection from my grandmother. Photos of my parents laughing when they were young, carefree and dating. My dad’s military records that had been tucked away since 2005, when he passed.

I wore gloves to keep my hands from being cut and bruised by the papers, boxes and cleaning supplies. But there was nothing to protect my heart as I relived the memories of my mom while we invaded her life.

The house was empty as I walked out the door and down the sidewalk past the “For Sale” sign.

Happy, healthy, and Safe. I knew her new environment would be just that. I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew it was necessary. I also knew there was no going back into that home and the space where my mom was the mom I remembered.

Happy, Healthy and Safe. Happy, Healthy, and Safe.

Isn’t that what we all want? Isn’t that what we all need? I wish this for my friends, my community and the world. I wish this for my family. I wish this for myself.

And I wished this for my Mom.

She lived in her retirement community for two years. The last year was rocky.

Filled with hospital visits and uncertainty. As the time grew closer, she knew.

Through her increased dementia, she began telling us that she was leaving and wouldn’t be here much longer.

This Mother's Day of 2020 marks nine months since we said good-bye to my sweet, loving, independent, feisty mom. Now, I believe she looks down on me and says "Yes, I am Happy, Healthy, & Safe." Happy Mother's Day, Mom. I love you! May each of you be "Happy, Healthy, and Safe" in the days ahead! Amen.

"O JESUS, I HAVE PROMISED" UMH #396

O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end;  
be thou forever near me, my Master and my friend.

I shall not fear the battle if thou art by my side,  
Nor wander from the pathway if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me! The world is ever near;  
I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear;  
my foes are ever near me, around me and within;  
but Jesus, draw thou nearer, and shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear thee speaking in accents clear and still,  
above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will.

O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;

O speak, and make me listen, thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee  
That where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be.  
And Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end;  
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.