

“Living Stones” (fn.:1 PETER 2 4-6 9-10.2019.DOC)

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:4-6, 9-10

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 1/6/19

1 Peter 2:4-6, 9-10:<sup>4</sup> *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and*<sup>5</sup> *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.*<sup>6</sup> *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.”*

<sup>9</sup> *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.*

<sup>10</sup> *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.*

I am clear that I am in the “building maintenance business for God.” And not because every church I have ever served had a roof that leaked! And not because of multiple building campaigns and capital fund-raising campaigns through the years. And not even because one of my first experiences in ministry was to accompany Ned, an eighty-year old member of the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC—I accompanied Ned in cleaning the gutters on the church's sanctuary.

Here was the process: We had a 30 foot ladder that we put against a building adjacent to the sanctuary. Once we climbed the ladder onto the roof of this side building, we then pulled that same ladder up and positioned it on that roof so that it leaned against the sanctuary wall. And then Ned—in his eighties, mind you—planned to scamper up the ladder. Young Parish Associates—my job—seem more expendable than 80 year-old heirlooms. So, there I climbed up to clean the gutters—almost 30 feet up, actually almost twice that height, considering that we had climbed onto the roof of the adjacent building.

I am in the building maintenance business for God...but not because of any experience with bricks and mortar, but rather because of our text for today. Our text for today comes from the heart of the First Epistle of Peter, where we are urged to come to “him”—come to Jesus—the living stone. Jesus is the first stone in the spiritual house known as the church. And we are all to be like him, living stones, built into this house, this temple. The church is not a building—the church is the people.

Now there is more than little bit of *double entendre* going on here—multiple meanings. Recall the source of our text—Simon Peter, that premier apostle of Jesus. The very word “Peter” was not a proper name in the first century; it was simply the common word for “rock.” No one named their child “Peter”—that would be like giving the child the name of “concrete” or “floor joist” or “gravel.” “Peter” was simply the word “rock.” And Jesus had given this nickname to one of his disciples, one Simon, the brother of Andrew. Jesus had said to Simon: “You are rock—you are Peter—and upon this “peter” (upon this rock), I will build my church.” (Matthew 16:17-18) And there is nothing about bricks, mortar, steel, wood, or concrete. The church is not a building—the church is the people.

I am in the building maintenance business for God. None of us here are the founders of the

church—that credit goes to Jesus. None of us here are even remotely the founders of the First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville. That credit goes to James White, Samuel Carrick, and a multitude of others whose legacy is marked by the graveyard. More than two centuries of service to Christ in the heart of Knoxville. The awesome and challenging invitation to me and to all in this congregation is to be in the building maintenance business—the very house of God in human form.

The building that counts is the community of people. And being community is not easy. It is easier to break down, to divide, to separate. As Abraham Lincoln once said of our national situation—a house divided will not stand. The building that counts is the community of people that has room for diversity.

The building that counts is one that shelters the outcasts, comforts the grieved, makes sacrifices for the troubled, is patient with our human foibles and failures. And that is not easy. For example, I'll let you in on some in-house gossip among preachers. Among preacher-types—who do gossip about congregations—you sometimes hear the following conversation:

Preacher A: “I hear you are talking to a pastor search committee?”

Pastor B: “Yes, it is XYZ church.”

Pastor A: “Oh, don't accept a call to that church. It is a ‘preacher-eating’ congregation.”

That's right—a “preacher-eating” congregation. And you look at that congregation's history—the usual pastoral tenure is 2 to 3 years. Any pastor reaching the fifth-year mark has open revolution, to which the solution is “Get rid of the preacher.” And the preacher moves on. It is a “preacher-eating church.”

By the way, I suppose we should add the category, “preacher-keeping” churches. I am only the 15<sup>th</sup> senior pastor of this congregation in 227 years (that is 208 years with an installed pastor; 19 years with a supply pastor). The average pastoral tenure has been over 14 years. Even more remarkable is that five of the 14 preceding pastors were here for five years or less...and still the average is over 14 years!

But back to the only building that counts—the people. The people also have a physical building—what we too often call “the church.” In an observation that many architects will recognize, Winston Churchill once said: “We form our buildings; then our buildings form us.”

We, the church, have formed this building. Now this physical building forms us for service. These facilities are not the club house for members to enjoy the benefits. This place is a launch pad for service; the incubator for faith; the catalyst for extravagant love.

This physical building forms us for our ultimate purpose: to worship God. This facility is the soil in which worship springs up to God...again and again, season after season, decade after decade, century after century. This particular sanctuary is the third such sanctuary planted on James White's turnip patch—two others have preceded it. Faith grows here now, not turnips.

What we are about today is to give thanks to God for the gifts, for the work, for the time that has gone into this physical building...but it is only the reflection of the living stones that make up the real house of God—the people. We are all living stones...to be part of the spiritual house of God.

On behalf of the Building Design Team, there is a special acknowledgement of some “living stones” among us that needs to be made. I have the following plaque, a memento for two people to share in their home. Let me read it to you. The heading reads: “Come to him, a living stone...and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. (1 Peter 2:4-5).” And then below that is a stone, a piece of rock that was harvested from “the Rock” that pokes out of the ground between the Sanctuary and Chapel but which extends underneath our facilities. The text continues: “To Bill and Ginny Morrow, who are “living stones” in the spiritual house of First Presbyterian Church; Presented January 2019.”

No one—except Bill, who was often her shadow—knows how much time, energy, and perseverance in this building project that Ginny has given to this church! And the chair of the fund-raising and “fun-raising” was Bill Morrow. At the first stage in moving forward on this project, the Session had already appointed Ginny to serve as the Building Design Committee chair, when the question was raised as to whether it would be appropriate for the financial fund-raising leadership to be lodged in the same household. The Session went into executive session to have this discussion. “Executive session” means no minutes are kept; elders may speak freely with the understanding that nothing is to be repeated. In other words, it is an absolutely confidential meeting. So, I can’t tell you what was said. What I can tell you is the result that was reached in just a few minutes: the Session unanimously confirmed the asking of Bill Morrow to head the financial campaign. As one person put it, this project “will need our strongest leaders and we are blessed that two happen live in the same household!” And while the Morrows will not tell you, I will tell you—they were also extremely generous in their financial contribution to this project.

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The Morrows were young when Simon and Garfunkel had a hit song: “I Am a Rock.” The lyrics of this Simon and Garfunkel’s song are about being a rock, emphasizing being isolated, alone, aloof, and unconnected. And, in direct contrast, our rocks—our living stones—are connected and with us. The Morrows have moved in and among us...to our great benefit. Thanks be to God!

And now as living stones, let us confess the faith of the church, using the words of the Apostles’ Creed.