

“Christ, Our Cornerstone”

1 Peter 2:4-10

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May 5, 2024

Last week, there were over 300 reports of tornadoes touching down in various parts of America’s Midwest. In the wake of such twister activity, people are now beginning the sad and arduous work of rebuilding their homes, their communities, and, MOST importantly, their LIVES. Almost twenty years have passed since that Memorial Day weekend when Rose and I were pulling the shrubbery out of the front of our house in Waterloo, Iowa when a siren suddenly began to blare throughout the city. Being new to the community, I wasn’t sure what was going on until my neighbor ran out of his house informing us that it was a tornado siren and that there were reports of one having touched down about ten miles away, completely devastating a small community in its path. I often drove through that town and afterwards, it looked like a nuclear blast had struck it. It would take years, but the town did recover and with all the new construction, it eventually was bigger and better than before. No doubt that same story will be repeated in many of those same communities throughout Texas and Oklahoma, Iowa and Indiana where most of the tornado damage occurred. I’m confident they’ll be more prepared the NEXT time such an emergency arises by building those new structures upon a much more solid footing.

Rebuilding is never an easy thing but it can be one of the most rewarding periods whether we’re speaking of buildings or of PEOPLES’ LIVES. This past week, I waited for Rose at a local auto repair shop while she was getting her new car inspected. Suddenly I heard a huge crash off to my right and was surprised to see the bucket of a large excavator pierce the roof of an old house that happened to be in the process of being demolished. I was transfixed by the sight of it- watching that bucket go through those walls and timbers like a hot knife through soft butter. I was struck by the thought of how what had taken months to build many years earlier and had been the scene of so many memorable occasions for its owners would soon be reduced to a mass of assorted bricks and rubble in only a few minutes’ time. Within days, building would then begin on a NEW house to take its place- one even MORE beautiful and BETTER constructed than the OLD one.

I’m sure you’ve seen the recent pictures of Paris’s Notre Dame Cathedral, much of it damaged during a tragic fire five years ago. A significant portion of what had taken a hundred years to build beginning all the way back in the 12th century was suddenly destroyed within only a matter of hours. However, like a phoenix rising from out its ashes, the people of France rallied together and, working around the clock, have miraculously restored her back to her former glory. It is now expected to be open to the public in time for the Paris Olympics this summer- certainly as beautiful but STURDIER and MORE RESISTANT TO FLAMES than before.

In 2004, I spoke at the centennial of the laying of the cornerstone of my then church- the First Presbyterian Church in Syracuse, New York. I noted how on that day a hundred years earlier, Dr. George Spaulding, the pastor of First Church, said in his remarks: “We build as did our Fathers for the Glory of God and service to our fellow men. They had no other foundation than Jesus Christ...we enter into their labors...we repeat their vows, sing their hymns, utter their

prayers and pledge ourselves to live their lives of holiness and devoted service...” Our Parish House which was then the Belden mansion, had been moved back from the main street to its present location and the NEW sanctuary would be constructed where the MANSION ITSELF had stood. While excavating its foundation, the contractor discovered a bed of quicksand, so 700 wooden piles were driven into the soil and eighteen inches of concrete were poured over them to secure them. As one trustee remarked, “We are building well the foundation of our Church.” In fact, it was done SO well that years later, its cellar was declared a fallout shelter in the event Syracuse ever came under a nuclear attack!

From off that foundation, a small neo-Gothic English cathedral constructed of Indiana limestone, one of the most beautiful church structures in all of Central New York would soon rise. The front of the sanctuary was comprised of a large Tiffany window with a scene from out of the book of Revelation. It would be in the sanctuary of that church that the first woman ever ordained to ministry in a mainline denomination—Margaret Towner—took place in 1956; and while I was still the minister there, the Lutheran Bishop of Upstate New York—Marie Jerge--was consecrated and installed as well. When I asked her why she wanted her investiture to take place in MY church of all places rather than one of the Lutheran churches in the city, she told me, “David, First Pres is not only the most historic church in all of Syracuse, it is ALSO the most BEAUTIFUL.”

This morning, my main remarks concern a passage from St. Peter’s Epistle to the Early Church. It was written to provide encouragement and hope to Christians in the northern part of Asia Minor who were undergoing persecution. The congregations, composed mainly of Gentile converts, are urged not to be surprised at the “fiery ordeal” which has come upon them. They are to rejoice EVEN IN THEIR TRIALS, which they share with their Christian brothers and sisters throughout the ancient world. By participating in the sufferings of Christ, they will demonstrate the genuineness of their faith. Our N.T. text instructs us that as beautiful and breathtaking as our modern temples of worship may be, they must never be mistaken for what the church TRULY is. St. Peter knew a little bit about foundations. Jesus told him that it would be upon this rock--the rock of FAITH--that he would build his church, and the gates of Hell would not prevail against it. Subsequently, in his sermon before the Jewish elders in the book of Acts, Peter declared that Jesus Christ was the stone that had been rejected by them, the builders, but which had become in fact the very cornerstone, the “Rock of Ages” upon which our salvation alone depended.

Peter opens chapter two of his first epistle by referring to wicked individuals in all their vileness and uncleanness and he ends the section by describing us as an ELECT RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD’S OWN POSSESSION. His concern is to instruct the early church on just what a great privilege God has conferred upon them, that they have become a NEW CREATION unlike anything else in the world; and secondly, that there is no such thing as an individual Christian apart from the community of faith. Without our incorporation into and involvement in the WHOLE body of Christ, we can not remain faithful children of God for long.

With v. 4, he tells us that we come to him as “living stones,” being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus

Christ. Then he quotes Isaiah 28:16: “Behold I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in him shall not be disappointed.” As Christians, we are being cleansed, shaped, dressed, and ready to be built into a “spiritual house” of whom Christ is the chief cornerstone. The cornerstone was the most important stone in the entire building. Normally, it was a large stone placed at the corner of the foundation to bind two walls together. If it was off angle, EVEN SLIGHTLY, then the rest of it would be crooked as well. Therefore, the solidity and stability of the structure was dependent upon the cornerstone BEING TRUE AND AT THE RIGHT ANGLE.

Peter is saying that Jesus Christ ALONE must be that cornerstone for our lives and faith, and because he IS solid and true, we CAN place our faith in him. This Christ is no dead doctrine; he is no myth or religious ideal. He is ever warm and alive and can reinvigorate even the COLDEST of hearts. From him, the rest of the building gets its stability, its trueness, that is, when it is securely cemented into him. Some years ago, I visited the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the only remaining foundation stones of Solomon’s great Temple. What had once been the glory of Israel had almost completely disappeared. In contrast, Jesus Christ remains a foundation which NEVER crumbles, NEVER disappears, but continues to grow as the Church expands throughout the world through her witness and her service. When we learn to trust in him; when we open ourselves up to his Spirit so that he comes in and takes up residency within us, our heart becoming his home; when we listen to his words and allow them to serve as a faithful guide to all our actions, only THEN can we in any way be considered “living stones,” being built up in a spiritual temple.

And we don’t have to be perfect before he can use us. He takes us just as we are, flawed and all, and then begins the work of fitting us together into a new community so that together we might reflect his glory. You’re all aware that it was the great Michelangelo who sculpted the colossal statue of David. What is NOT widely known is that he carved that great work of art out of a single block of marble that had been spoiled and rejected by an inferior sculptor some years before. From out of the mind and heart and hands of this great artisan, imperfection took on perfection, a rugged stone became a masterpiece for the ages. This is what CHRIST does when he takes our OWN flawed and imperfect lives, carves away the rough places, and then places his name, his stamp upon us. Whatever we once may have been--thieves or murderers, drunkards or drug addicts--we are now “choice and precious in the sight of God” as Peter writes. However, in order that we might become “living stones,” we must be in alignment with the cornerstone, Christ himself. That is to say, we must commit ourselves to him in faith.

Once our lives have been cleaned and shaped and dressed, they are now ready to be fitted into place, into the LARGER structure called “the Church.” Christians cannot exist by themselves- ours is a SOCIAL faith. Without a community of faith, we would not have HEARD of Christ much less believed in him. Our faith comes to us through the witness of the church. Some of us may have been born into it where our faith, like a seed, eventually took root and matured. Some of us may have just wandered into a worship service and there felt the call of Christ claiming us for himself. Regardless, it was through THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST, that we first encountered him and THROUGH which we remain close to him. For without a relation to the Christian community, our individual Christianity becomes either impossible or tenuous and incomplete. In our highly individualistic society, where commitment

does not come naturally and where we'd rather live by our OWN rules, without the church to anchor our spiritual lives in, we run the risk of losing our faith ENTIRELY. There can be no "Lone Rangers" in the Church. Those who are related to Christ as Lord and Savior ALSO relate themselves to that unique and organic community of fellow believers we call "the Church."

When someone says to me that he or she can be a Christian without the love and support, the training and discipline of the church, that person deludes him or herself. He is then saying that he does not need to be a "living stone" in the Lord's house, that he does not have to pray over the needs or concerns of others, does not need to sing hymns and confess sins and hear the Word of God preached- a word which brings faith and hope to the hungriest heart. He is saying that he doesn't have to align his life with other believers so as to rejoice with them in their joys and mourn with them in their sorrow, that he doesn't need to support the Lord's work with his tithes or commit himself with others to Christian service. Above all, he is saying that he doesn't need to partake of the sacraments, of the body and blood of our Lord which is meant to impart spiritual sustenance to us which can be found nowhere else.

Some years ago, I came across an article in the newspaper about the singer Madonna and her conversion to Kabbalah, a strain of Jewish mysticism. In it, the writer had this to say:

Like so many Americans today, Madonna has turned her back on traditional religion and morality, opting instead to make her own rules. Her meandering spiritual search suggests that her self-referential beliefs have repeatedly failed to satisfy her. But she is unwilling to fully embrace a religious tradition that makes real demands— demands that go beyond wearing a bracelet or making a quasi-pilgrimage overseas.

Madonna wants spirituality without religion and salvation without repentance. She wants cheap grace. And try as she might, she cannot find it.

She cannot find it because authentic spirituality is always rooted in conversion, commitment and community. It always comes with strings attached- not the strings of a bracelet donned for good luck but the strings of objective moral standards that require the believer to conform her life to God rather than the other way around.

A while back, I was part of a group of Presbyterian pastors who would spend a week in the outdoors of northern Canada on a spiritual retreat- the entire experience was meant to model what the church was originally intended to be. During our excursions, we liked to begin and end each day with worship after which there'd be a period of open sharing. Several confessed to having come in order to make some important decisions regarding their own ministries. There was never a time when we weren't assisting one another with each other's packs or helping to carry the canoes, gathering firewood or sharing the cooking duties. A lot of bonding took place during the rigors of our adventure together. There was one day when we were all dropped off at a different section of the lake for a 24-hour period during which we were to spend the time in fasting and prayer. I never knew that such prolonged quiet and isolation could prove so difficult.

The point was to teach us what it really meant to BE the church, that the church wasn't a building REGARDLESS how large or beautiful or what the name on the sign out front might say on it. The church is principally a body of BELIEVERS who, sharing a similar commitment to Jesus Christ, allows his love to be channeled through our lives together. On one of our trips, our evening worship centered on a devotional bestseller by John Eldredge called *Waking The Dead*

and one passage in the book seemed to sum it all up for us:

Church is not a building. Church is not an event that takes place on Sundays. I know, it's how we've come to think of it. "I go to First Baptist." "We are members of St. Luke's." "Is it time to go to church?" Much to our surprise, that is not how the Bible uses the term. Not at all. Certainly, the body of Christ is a vast throng, millions of people around the globe. But when the Scripture talks about church, it means community. The little fellowships of the heart that are outposts of the kingdom. A shared life. They worship together, eat together, pray for one another, go on quests together.

Last fall, my former church, the First Presbyterian Church in Waterloo, Iowa, celebrated the 100th anniversary of ITS construction. Rose and I were invited to return for it but due to previous commitments were unable to attend the gala. It is a large Gothic Revival structure with a tower housing a carillon of fourteen bells which often plays concerts that can be heard all throughout the city. Over time, it would serve as the church home to close to three thousand members as well as help establish such organizations as the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, Cedar Valley Hospice, Grin & Grow Day Care, and the House of Hope, a place for the homeless in the area to receive a hot meal and find some respite. The PRIOR sanctuary of First Pres was located directly across the park where it had an interesting history of its own. Known as the Boulder Church, it became nationally famous and even listed in *Ripley's Believe or Not* for having been constructed entirely from the stone of a single boulder located on a farm east of Waterloo.

Similarly, unless Jesus Christ is the singular boulder from which OUR lives as children of God are constructed, the cornerstone from which our lives receive their solidity and stability, and unless we are committed to him by faith and our lives are submitted under his authority, then we are NOT Christian, REGARDLESS of what our name on the membership roll might indicate. The presence (or lack thereof) of the fruit of the Spirit--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control--will soon betray whether Jesus IS actually present or not. If we are selfish and proud, envious and spiteful, then we are not cemented into his life and nor can we be called "living stones."

Furthermore, unless Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our COMMUNITY, of our life together, it is hard to argue that we are in fact a church, IN SPITE of the presence of pews, the beautiful music inside, and the large sign out front. The church is PEOPLE- persons who remain committed to a man and his message; persons who practice patience and humility, forgiveness and love between themselves; persons who as Eldredge says "worship together, eat together, pray for one another, go on quests together." If we DO, then we are INDEED an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's own possession. Then, might it be said of US, even as it was of my old church in Syracuse, "We are building well the foundation of our Church." Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, even as we received your Son Jesus Christ as Lord, may we CONTINUE to live our lives knowing that we are securely rooted in and continually built up in him, that he is INDEED the ROCK OF OUR SALVATION who has bound us together as one. Consequently, may we find ourselves strengthened in the faith we were taught and constantly overflowing with thankfulness to you. In Christ's name we pray, amen and amen.