

It's About Becoming Living Stones
I Peter 2:2-10 April 20, 2008

I Peter was written to a people living in exile. They were persecuted Christians. Many died horrible deaths. The letter was sent from group to group of the dispersed believers to try and build them up – to encourage them – to fill them with hope. The author's intent was to help them see that they were important despite what they were going through. He called them "living stones," "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." (I Peter 2:9) The author was at one and the same time a cheerleader, a coach and a motivational speaker.¹

"Keep the faith! Stay together! Let God create a spiritual house with you -something new out of you who are bound together in Christ - so that others will come to believe! Be living stones!"

Oh, how I've fallen in love with that imagery this week. I hope I can help it come alive for you – in you – this morning.

Jesus is the cornerstone – we've heard that before. He is the foundation on which our faith is built – the foundation on which the church is built. But, the author of I Peter offers an additional image of this cornerstone. He's a living cornerstone! This is the resurrected one – the one who is still alive – on which our faith is built. This is a cornerstone that moves – that does – that has life! And, the author asks us to understand ourselves in the same way – as living stones – that together with Christ and one another we live out our faith – live into our faith – witness of our faith. It is together that we are called to be – not for the purpose of ourselves – not for our own edification – not for our own spirituality – but so that we are able to be strengthened for the living out of the faith in the world desperate to see something that makes a difference.

One preacher offered this perspective: "Brick and mortar – lumber and nails – arches, rafters, and flying buttresses – rock and concrete: When you build a church, what are the elements you want to include? Does it have to have a steeple? Must you have a bell in a bell tower? Do you install a baptistery, or does your particular brand of Christianity prefer a baptismal font? Do you install pews, or use removable chairs to give your building more versatility?"

"When Jesus built his church, he didn't consider any of these components. When Jesus built his church, he started with a very small, but firm foundation. Upon that foundation, he built a structure that has been rocked and windblown, shaken and flooded, even attacked by numerous enemies, and yet has withstood and survived down through the ages.

"What is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to be? Are we simply in a 'church building' that has become stiff and boring, weathered by the years and near extinction? Or, are we a 'building church,' with veins full of life and the empowered goals of still wanting to reach the heavens? The church that Jesus built was a living church, alive with the 'living stones' that were its building materials. Living stones that had as their cornerstone the very stone that the builders of the world had rejected."²

The preacher went on and talked about the simple material with which Jesus chose to build his church – a few fishermen, a tax collector, some others of simple means and position in society.

“Jesus used stones, a variety of living stones. He used stones that would weather the cause - stones that would not crumble under the weight that would be built upon them. The building material that Jesus chose was well suited for the building he intended to construct. For the church that Jesus was building was to be a living, breathing construction of dynamic proportions.”³

We are living stones. But, alone we are useless – like a solitary brick. We don’t become all we can be until we are joined with other living stones. A stack of stones lying in a field has very little value. But, when someone takes those stones and places them on a solid foundation and joins them together with mortar, some pretty spectacular buildings get built.⁴

And so it is when our lives are joined together by Jesus Christ and we become the church and not a bunch of solitary believers. When we become the family of Christ – a community of faith – unbelievable things can be accomplished. And, it is only in community that authentic Christianity can be seen or experienced or lived out. To use Wesley’s and the language of others – there is no such thing as a solitary Christian.

In most of Lewis Grizzard’s columns he came off as this sort of crusty, tough, redneck type of guy. He revealed another side of himself when he wrote about the church one day.

“On a cold day last week I stood outside the church in my hometown of Moreland, Georgia, that is so dear to my childhood and tried to remember how long it had been since I was inside. Ten years? At least that long. But if there weren’t still roots here, would I come back so often in my mind?

“Church was about all we had then. Sunday School was at 10, but preaching was only twice a month since we shared sermons and preacher with another flock down the road. What did they call Sunday night? MYF? (Methodist Youth Fellowship)

“We had a couple of rowdy brothers in town who broke into a store. They were juvenile offenders. Their punishment was to attend the Methodist Youth Fellowship for six months. First night they were there, they beat up on two boys and threw a Cokesbury hymnal at the lady who met with us and always brought cookies.

“She ducked in time and then looked them squarely in their devilish eyes. So, as the angel she was, she said, ‘I don’t approve of what you boys did here tonight, and neither does Jesus. But if He can forgive you, I guess I can too.’ She handed them the whole plate of cookies, and last I heard, both are good daddies with steady jobs and rarely miss a Sunday in church. That was the first miracle I ever saw.”⁵ I would offer you this morning that she was a living stone – a living stone which Jesus uses to build his church.

Too often I am afraid we mess up this thing we call church. In another preacher’s sermon I read this week he explained the concern with these words: “Many people – even many on our roll – look at the church as a chapel, a temple, a shrine – even, God help us, a museum, perhaps. That is, to many people the church is a place you go – to pay homage to God. Some go weekly, some go every month or so, some perhaps twice a year. Once they’ve done that, they feel they have fulfilled their religious obligation. These are nice people. However, they don’t have a clue about what it means to be a church.

“The church is not a place we go – the church is who we are! We are ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, ... living stones.’ This building is not the church. It is where the church meets. When you leave this building you are still the church. When you go to your civic club, you are

still the church. When you dine with your family, when you have recreation, when you go to the office, when you fulfill your civic responsibility and cast your ballot on election day, you are still the church. And if you do any of these things with no thought to God, you are betraying your calling as a follower of Jesus Christ.”⁶

Way back in 125 A.D. the philosopher Aristides described the early Christian community to the Roman Emperor Hadrian like this: “They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the person who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home as a brother or sister in the spirit, the Spirit of God.”⁷

A prominent pastor in San Diego by the name of Dr. Jim Standiford tells about the great love his father had for the church. He tells about what a devoted churchman he was, but how he sometimes severely criticized those with whom he disagreed on church matters. Standiford recalls that his dad could offer a fair “chewing out” of persons he disagreed with. He admits that he could be a difficult man. Then Standiford’s father’s mother died.

She was regarded as one of the matriarchs of the church – Mother Standiford was how she was affectionately known. When her service was over, Pastor Standiford’s dad was walking behind her casket when he suddenly collapsed. Two of the persons who came to his aide the most quickly were two that he had publicly criticized very recently. Together they lifted him and accompanied him down the aisle – one on each side of him for support. Standiford notes that it was at that moment, as a high school junior, that he saw the church in a whole new light. He says that it was at that moment that he understood what the church was. It was those two men’s demonstration of love for his father which became Standiford’s call to ministry.⁸

There is a Zulu proverb that goes like this: “When a thorn pierces the foot, the whole body bends over to pull it out.” We are priests to one another – living stones. When one of us is in pain, we all share our strength with the person in pain in order for the pain to be eased.⁹

Radio personality, Charles Osgood, told on [The Osgood Files](#) about two elderly women in the same nursing home who had suffered strokes. Margaret’s stroke left her paralyzed on the left side. Ruth’s damaged her right side.

It was sad. It was sad for an additional reason which was that they both had been accomplished pianists. Both had given up hope of ever playing again. And then, one day the Activities Director suggested that they play solo pieces together – with one of them playing the left hand and the other playing the right.

Well, it worked and it brought great joy to both of them and to their fellow residents and their visiting family members. What a wonderful picture of what the church can be when its individual members work together to make our life more than it could ever be alone! “We need to be in community because we need to know we are cared for, because we need to receive spiritual nourishment from each other, and because we need to work together if we’re going to get anything significant accomplished. It’s God’s blessing that we can be built together into a ‘spiritual house.’”¹⁰

Bishop William Willimon put it this way once: “It is only in communion, in community, in God’s community that we get the support, encouragement, discipline, forgiveness, rebirth, conversion, and nurture that we need ... The grace of God is not often known by isolated individuals ... Our Creator has made us to be social creatures ... It is not good for man or woman to be alone.”¹¹

Living stones bound together by the living stone, the cornerstone and the mortar that is Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. Amen.

1. King Duncan, "Building On a Firm Foundation," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
2. Richard W. Ferris, "The Church That Jesus Built," Sermons for Sundays: In Lent and Easter: Temptation of the Palms (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 0788023241b.
3. Ibid.
4. King Duncan, "Building a Life," Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
5. Donald Shelby, "Speaking of Hallowed Things," January 17, 1988 as quoted by Maxie Dunnam, "The Nature of the Church and Christian Discipleship," (MaxieDunnam.com), 0-000-000-4000.
6. King Duncan, "Who Are We, Really?" Dynamic Preaching Second Quarter 2008 (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2008), 0-000-0000-20.)
7. Ibid.
8. <http://ww.fumcsd.org/sermons/sr080606.html>.
9. "Who Are We Really?"
10. Alex Gondola, Jr. "Is It Community Today?" Come as You Are (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 2000), 0-7880-1562-1.
11. Ibid.