

May 10, 2020

God's People

Shepherd's Grace Church

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if 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 ⁵like 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. ⁶For 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.'

⁷To 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',

⁸and
'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 marvellous 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. (1 Peter 2: 2-10)

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

8 Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' ⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (John 14: 1-10)

Happy Mother's Day to all the moms out there and to all the women out there. As we gather this morning, it is worth remembering that we gather in unique times. We are together across the miles and we are gathered in ways that could not have been imagined even a few short years ago.

I know many of you are mindful that the way we are worshiping this morning is far from traditional. Some are gathered in front of a computer screen, others in front of a telephone, others in front of a television but none are gathered in our sanctuary. None are sitting in church in the traditional sense, sitting next to their moms and sitting up a little straighter than usual, proud to be next to someone who has shared so much with us.

I am sure many of us have special memories of Mother's Days past. Hopefully, some of these memories are of a part of Mom's special day spent in church! I know I have shared before that some of my most special Mother's day memories are of the second Sunday in May being spent in Oklahoma City with my Nana and my mom.

I have seen my Nana proud and happy on any number of occasions but never have I seen her prouder and happier than when she walked into church on Mother's day with all her family in tow. On those special Sunday mornings, not only was my mom and all our family with her, but also my mom's sister and her family were there. I suspect my cousin Harmona is watching this morning and hopefully she can remember some of those moments too. She is much older than I am however and...well, you know!

The farther I get from those days, however, one of the most special memories I have is the look of pride in my own mother's eyes. She was proud to be with her mother, but she was perhaps even more proud to share her family with

her mom. I think back and realize that while we often gave gifts to my mom on mother's day, the best gift we gave her was the gift of letting her share all of us with the most special person in her life!

In this morning's lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." Perhaps we should consider that one of those mansions for those of us who know Jesus as Messiah and Savior is the mansion of our heart. Our heart is the temple of the Lord and is a truly special place wherein the Lord resides.

I know that on those special days when my mom and her sister shared their families with my Nana, the Lord filled the temple of my mother's heart in a very special way. I also know that the Lord filled that temple of Love to overflowing because I could see it in the very special women who formed and touched my life in such a special way.

This morning, as we gather on Mother's day, many of us are remembering and recognizing the incredible love our moms shared with us in so many different ways. Perhaps some of us are far away from our moms or because of our circumstances are unable to spend time with mom today, or perhaps our mom has already gone home to be with the Lord. Whatever the circumstance, if you are kept from seeing your mom today, know that in the mansion built in her heart, the hope and passion she has for you is overflowing.

If you are a woman, you know the heartfelt love of which I speak. It is a love that all women possess and it is a love that they long to share. To all women, today is a day all of us recognize your love and we remember...and we say thank you! You are special.

You have helped to prepare a place for us in this world, a place that is only temporary but you have made it home. You have nurtured us and comforted us and provided for us in ways that only you could do. Your preparation of this earthly home has made it possible for us to imagine that heavenly home which Jesus prepares for us in eternity. Your preparation has made it possible for us to know the way, the truth, the life!

From the very first moments of our lives in this world, you were there. Your example of selfless love has made it possible for us to know the kind of love that God has for each of us. For us, you have shown the way. You have helped and guided us so that we may know that we belong to someone, that we are special, that we are.

As Peter opens the passage we are studying this morning, he invites us all to seek after a pure, spiritual milk; the kind of food that will help us grow. We know this encouragement is a metaphor but you moms know what it means to have the responsibility for the growth of your children.

Long after I had started feeding myself, I remember my mother making sure I had the very best milk to drink. I am aware that the example I am going to use here is going to date me, but it may just date some of you as well. How many of you remember the "milk man?"

When I was a kid, we did not have a refrigerator. We had what was called an Ice Box. An ice box is different from a refrigerator. An icebox uses electricity but just to provide some light when you open the door. It keeps food cold by storing ice in a compartment. The ice, because it is kept in a separate place lasts longer, just like if you put it in a cooler.

Eventually, the ice melts but not for a while. Back in the day, people went down to the ice house. There they bought a big chunk of ice. They couldn't get one that was too big, but they could get one that would fit into their icebox. Food that needed to be kept cold was put into the icebox and at my house, anyway, there were strict instructions to "not open the door!"

Opening and closing the door let warm air in from outside. Did I mention that there was no air conditioner in the house where I grew up? There wasn't air conditioning in most of my friends houses either. I just say this to let you know I did not grow up in some place that was backwards...like Oklahoma or something!

Anyway, we did not open or close the door to the icebox without a specific reason. To just "look in there to see what was there" was not a good enough reason and would likely get us sent immediately to our room.

The icebox was the place where we kept the milk. Because of temperature variation, milk did not last very long. It did last longer than just a day or two, but not much. Mom's responsibility therefore was to make sure that we always had good, unspoiled milk. She had to judge how much we were using and when it would run out. In addition, she had to make this judgment before the event happened.

Obviously, the judgment came easier when she had some experience with how much we were using, how long the ice would last, and when the milkman came. Her first few attempts, though were probably flawed. Still, she did not

shirk her responsibility. She did what she could to make sure we had the milk we needed when we needed it.

Peter says this morning that we are to seek after the pure spiritual milk. He says this because there is a difference between that which is pure, that which is whole, and that which is something other. Today, are given many choices when we go to the store to get milk. We have no fat, lo fat, 1%, 2%, and whole milk just to name a few.

While Peter could never have imagined so many choices, his point was still the same. We are to seek the pure. Those of us who remember the milkman, know exactly what Peter was talking about. The pure is that which is fresh and whole and has all the components of the food which milk is intended to be.

For those old enough to remember, you know exactly where I am going now. Remember the milkman and how it felt the day the milkman came? I used to like to be the first to get to the door after he left our order. Why? For those of you who do not know, when the milkman left the order, the milk was cold, it was fresh, and the cream was still at the top. If you were first, you could get the cream for your cereal and fresh cream on a bowl of cereal tasted great!

For me, at least, that was the purest part of the milk! It was thick and rich and...well, creamy! It was worth the effort and it made the whole meal taste better. If you weren't first to get to the bottles, the cream was gone. Mom would either skim it off for something she was planning to make or she would shake it into the rest of the milk and all that creamy goodness would just disappear!

This morning, Peter is encouraging us to get to the door first, to seek out the pure, the fresh, the whole and let that nourish us! He wants us to drink deeply of the goodness so we can grow. Now to be sure, as we get older, we do not need nor should we have the full effect of the cream at the top of the milk. When we indulge ourselves too much, we get fat and lazy but when we are first coming into the word, Peter wants us to know that what we are enjoying is the pure, the honest, the whole. It is this that helps us grow!

Some of you who have young children know what I am talking about here. You know that when you bring your young children to communion, I kneel down to look directly into their eyes and as I offer them the cup, I say what Peter says to us this morning. Taste and see that God is good!

When we have the whole picture of who God is, we can drink it all in. We can taste it and savor it and enjoy it as we grow in faith. This morning, this mother's day morning where we are separated by miles, I invite you to drink deeply of the memories God has given us to share. I invite you to know God is working to bring us together and that His plan requires our discipline. We must stand strong together; strong in the strength our mothers have given us. We must trust that God is doing something to invite us in ways which we can not begin to imagine.

"Come to Him," Peter says! As you grow, come to him. He will give you the wisdom you need to stay the course in difficult times such as these if you will come to him! There is a catch to this phrase, however. Peter is not advocating that we come as individuals. He is inviting us to come together. He says that Jesus is a "Living Stone" which has been rejected by others.

It is easy for us to imagine this rejection. Perhaps we are thinking Pharisees or Priests; Jewish leaders who abused Him and caused him to suffer. Before we leap to this inditement, we must remember to whom Peter is speaking. He is speaking to the alienated, the abandoned, the isolated. Peter is speaking to people such as us. People who are living in difficult times. He wants those people to know that they have a choice to make. He wants us to know that we have a choice to make.

Jesus suffered rejection by some so that he could be the rock for all! He suffered because all are worthy of salvation. He suffered so that all could drink in the pure food of God and grown into the gift which He alone could bring. Those who reject him must at least know Him! It is imperative that all know Him and have a choice.

Peter reminds us that God made that choice. Last week we discussed how god made that choice before the beginning of time. He made a choice and offered us that which was most precious to Him. He sent his son, the living stone, the rock upon which the church, God's ambassador to the world was to be built!

As I said, though, He did not choose Jesus to come to us as individuals. He knew that no one person would ever be strong enough to witness to God's glory alone. Instead, Peter invites us all to become "Living Stones," to become a spiritual house strengthened by standing next to and on top of one another.

The rocks we stand next to this morning are our brothers and sisters and while we are separated, we still stand together. The mortar that holds us together

is the pure, whole milk with which we were strengthened as we have grown. We know we can trust the promise of God that the Church (here written in capital letters) is universal and complete because we all stand together.

The rocks we stand on this morning are the rocks of those who have gone before us. Their faith has inspired our own and their teaching has taught us the truth. That truth is Jesus, the Messiah! As John tells us this morning, salvation can come from no other place! It is only through Him that we can be granted access to the Kingdom!

Today we stand on the shoulders of giants and we stand beside one another having grown into a promise made long ago. It is a promise we can trust. It is that pure milk our mothers and our fathers provided for us and that we continue to provide for our children. Those who believe in these promises will never be put to shame.

The "Living stones" that are the base of our foundation are anchored by the "Cornerstone" which serves as a reminder of whose the church is. You know the cornerstone of a building. It is the stone on which the inscription of the date of completion is inscribed. It often gives the architect information as well as the names of those who have been instrumental in getting the building erected.

Our "Cornerstone" is the "Living Word" who was from the beginning the one who brought all things into being. (John 1) He proceeded from the father and is in fact the very image and likeness of the father, the one who is the chief architect of the world.

The world has rejected this "Cornerstone" because the stone does not serve the purposes of the world. The world wants wealth and fame and fortune. Our "cornerstone" does not hold up ideals such as these. Instead, our "cornerstone" aspires to love and service as key elements of that which is to come into being.

Those who believe in this stone acknowledge the true purposes of the building from which the living stones are built. Those who do not, reject the building, the church because they have not chosen to obey the "Word" upon which it is founded, the commandments given and the value proclaimed.

Jesus said, "I leave you a new commandment; that you love one another. Even as I have loved you, you should love one another." (John 13) This is the fundamental commandment upon which the church stands. In today's world,

as in the past love, especially the kind of love of which Jesus speaks, necessarily means that we put others ahead of ourselves.

In the today which faces all who will read this message, that challenge is particularly debatable! On this Sunday morning the issue is the Corona virus which has caused disease, death and destruction to our world. Since the 21st of January we have been dealing with this disease and the impact it is having on our society.

As we gather this morning, more than 75,000 people have died in the United States alone. More than one million have been infected and are ill. More than 30 million are unemployed. We in Cowley County have been largely exempted from the illness but we have been affected by the economic impact. As a result, there has been widespread debate among us; should we open up and go back to business as usual to minimize the economic impact of "shelter in place" or should we conform to the rules that have been set in place for us.

I have witnessed debate on both sides of this conversation and have watched as intelligent discussion has degenerated into name calling and finger pointing. As I come to you this morning, I confess that I want us to consider the commandment upon which we as people of faith are to stand. "Love One Another!"

How can we live and love one another when we encounter such diametrically opposed arguments? The answer, it seems is that we must value those elements of our faith which are put forth as priorities. We must ask ourselves, what did Jesus, our "Cornerstone" come to do? In John 6, we learn that "Jesus came to redeem all that was given to him." He did not come to establish new priorities but to restore the creation that came first. That creation was and is life. In John 10, we learn that Jesus came that we might have life and have it in abundance.

Now, sometimes, life brings difficulty such as economic hardship. Sometimes it brings sickness, but life never brings death. The life we are promised is a life where we work together to accept the command we are given. WE are to Love One Another! We are to stand together and face death and overcome it because of the grace that has been given us!

What can we do in our current situation to overcome death? We can separate ourselves so we minimize risk to "at risk" people. We can forgo unnecessary contact with others and we can recognize that this will create hardships for enormous segments of our population.

We must bear these hardships together so that we can all see the other side of what love looks like. We must give to others and share with others until the threat of death is eliminated. We must view it as unacceptable we, anyone of us, might be the cause of death for another. We must also view it as unacceptable that anyone of us might profit from the misfortune of another.

Economic and political posturing must be put aside for the sake of love. We can overcome economic hardship. We cannot overcome death. Christ came so that we might know this, so that we might choose life in all ways and at all times and so that we might choose it abundantly!

Why? Because once we were no people. Once we had no purpose and no sense of what it might mean to work together to accomplish something greater than ourselves. Then God called. God set us on a journey together inviting us to participate in a grand plan that would lead to the uniting of all people.

Once we were no people. Now we are God's people! Now we are a people set on a mission and that mission is to make the world know that the Creator of the Universe has called us out of darkness in order to shed light on something we could not imagine!

That something is God's mercy. You see, we deserve death. We deserve to be poor and bereft of any sense of hope, but Jesus took all of that to the cross for us and showed great mercy. We call it grace! It is amazing and it is real and it is offered to all! It unites us and invites us to pursue something greater than we deserve.

It invites us to recognize that we can indeed be living stones, linked together with a mortar of love! It invites us to be living stones joined to a strong cornerstone that has overcome rejection in order to stand strong and hold us fast in a world that would tear us down. It invites us to know that once we had nothing...once we were no people, NOW WE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE! Amen!