

# “God’s Own People”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 3, 2020*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Rev. John Wahl

I Peter 2:1-10

The ultimate function and purpose of any Christian community – according to what we hear in today’s reading from I Peter – is that, having been built up by the word of Christ, the church now bears the word of Christ to the world. As Jesus is the living stone – the foundation of our life and identity – we are made into a spiritual building: the household of God. We do this by putting away those things that might divide us and live united in our faith.

Some of us may not remember a day when we were not God’s own people, when we had not yet received mercy. For many believers, the church has always been a part of our lives and identities. We have fond memories of parents or grandparents taking us to church when we were children; of learning the stories of the Bible in Sunday School and singing in children’s choirs; of taking part in Christmas pageants and Easter egg hunts.

For some of us, the church has been a constant in our lives. But others came into the church at a later time; invited by a friend or encouraged by a spouse; or faced with a crisis that prompted change in a new direction. Still others have wandered in and then out of congregations; spending months, years or even decades at a distance before returning to the household of faith.

When I worked in Washington DC and lived in nearby Arlington, Virginia for two years after college, I attended the local Methodist church which was within walking distance from my apartment. But, even though the building was located only a couple blocks away, getting there was not so simple. It was prompted by a relationship formed with someone I met while volunteering Saturday mornings at the local food bank. After we had worked together for a couple of weeks, he asked me whether I went to church. I told him about the congregation in Kentucky that I grew up in, but that I had kind-of drifted away while I was away at school and had stopped going.

That prompted him to ask me: “You come here to help feed people; what is feeding you?” He then invited me to attend a Bible Study program at his church called *Discipleship*. I did so and ended up completing a 30-week survey course on the Bible. It

provided me with my first chance to be an adult Christian; to learn for myself how and where I wanted to be a part of the household of faith.

I don't remember the name of the man who offered that invitation; or any of the folks that were a part of his church; but – looking back now, almost 30 years later – I understand that what they offered me was an invitation to have what I Peter calls “pure, spiritual milk.” We need this nourishment because we are like newborns who, according to today's reading, “may grow into salvation – if you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

The original audience of I Peter – likely comprised of Gentile converts to church, resident aliens living in cities around Asia Minor during the decades after Christ – were, in a spiritual sense, like newborns. This letter encourages them to embrace this new identity that they have adopted: one that may have brought upon them ridicule or even persecution. As God's own people, they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation. God has called them to be much more than they could have ever been before, or apart from, this new identity.

So, how can these same words inform and encourage us today? What does our identity as God's own people prompt us to say and do and believe in today's world? We may not face the same obstacles of alienation and persecution as these early Christians did. Still, we know that the role of the church has been and continues to change in today's world. We live in an increasingly diverse society, filled with people of many different faiths; or no faith. Fewer and fewer of our neighbors – and maybe family member as well – actively participate in faith communities. And, even over the past two months, what it is like to take part in church has undergone a radical transformation; changes we're not sure how long will continue.

Today, we will experiment with our first virtual communion. Sharing the Lord's Supper at home – rather than gathered in a church building – causes us to re-imagine the definition of our unity. I Peter offers us this language about being living stones that – built together – create a *spiritual* house; a holy priesthood. We are therefore each priests – not needing someone else to physically bless our bread and wine in order for it to become *spiritual* food – and thus, we can all offer *spiritual* sacrifices that are acceptable to God.

In the ancient world, sacrifices – burnt offerings of animals or grains – were measured by their value; the larger and purer the sacrifice, the better chance that its aroma would reach the gods. For Christians, *spiritual* sacrifices are meant to serve God's dual purposes of building up God's own people and sharing the good news of God's word with the world. Just as we have received God's mercy, we are called to show mercy to others.

These trying past several weeks have re-introduced many of us to the reality of sacrifice; facing lost lives and jobs; confronting hunger and trauma, cancelling classes

and pausing plans. Each of us has been asked to place the welfare of others – even those we do not see or often think about – above our own comfort and personal preference. Everyone has been asked to give things up – large or small – without any certain promise of relief or reward.

Our faith communities – even in these times of broad and sudden transition – teach us the language and stories of faith. We do this largely through our practices: through worshipping and serving together, by gathering in fellowship and willingly sharing our burdens, offering examples of hope, joy, peace and perseverance. We also do this by sharing a holy meal together; recalling the example of Christ the living stone and being reminded of the truth that we cannot feed others if we are not being nourished ourselves.

The difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that they see different things, but that they see things differently. Few people dispute that Jesus lived; or that he was crucified for his teachings. But, for believers – as individuals and as a community – Christ, the living stone, is a foundation piece upon which the whole church is built. His identity – and that of God’s own people – helps to create our identities. His path shows us the way we should go. His mercy informs our mercy.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is not necessarily the smartest people – nor is it the most pious or virtuous – that recognize Christ as the cornerstone rather than a stumbling block. Faith is always a gift of grace and not an achievement. Maybe yesterday, or last year, or 30 years ago, our own faith was on the brink or had not yet been formed. In the great story that God has authored, who knows who will discover mercy tomorrow; who next will be included in God’s own people? Our purpose as the church is to build one another up and share the story – in word, yes; but maybe even more so in deed – that God knows us, loves us, and has called us to be holy.

No matter how much we feed others – and no matter how long we have been active participants in the community of faith – we still need to be fed with the “pure, spiritual milk” of God’s word. It may be true that at some point, we were not God’s people; but now – today – we are God’s own people. Though we are not able to physically gather today, we have been invited to gather spiritually at Christ’s table; just as God has made us: united, precious and holy. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> David Bartlett in *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. 12