

2020 05 10 – Living Stones

1 Peter 2:2-10

Let's imagine what life is like for the people who initially receive this letter. We know that they are living in the latter half of the first century. We know that the recipients are members of fledgling churches in Asia Minor, the part of the world we now call Turkey. We know that many of them are Jewish and that the rest are Gentiles with a Greek or Roman heritage. We know they are all baptized followers of the way, Jesus' way, and that many of their baptisms are recent. In fact, the author compares them to newborn babies, still needing their mother's milk, with lots of growing ahead of them. We know that the recipients of this letter are ordinary people struggling to follow the teachings of Jesus.

We also know that they are suffering. The Jewish followers are suffering because they are no longer welcome in their synagogues or temples. The Gentile followers are suffering because they have been ostracized by their families and friends. They are all suffering because their government despises foreign religions and has started to actively persecute them. They are afraid. So they meet in secret, in small groups, in their own homes. They are suffering because of their chosen religion.

Most of us have probably never been persecuted because of our religion, but we do know what it feels like to be filled with fear and uncertainty. In this time of COVID-19 we have been sheltering in our homes, afraid to even go to the grocery store. We have created a sense of security through isolation and social

distancing. But now as our province begins to open up we are afraid of the danger that increasing levels of interaction could bring.

We have recently discovered what it feels like to have to practice our religion in our homes. We have recently discovered what it feels like to be worried about worshipping in public, especially in large groups. Our fear is not religious persecution, but rather a fear of sickness and even death. In many ways, we are like that fledgling church in Asia Minor, as we seek to find new ways to follow Jesus even in the midst of a pandemic.

The authorship of this letter is widely disputed amongst biblical scholars, but for simplicity we'll go with tradition and call the author Peter.

Peter knows that the people in these fledgling congregations are missing their traditional ways of worshipping. Peter knows that the Jewish followers are longing for their synagogues and the Gentiles are missing their temples to the Greek and Roman Gods. So Peter searches the Hebrew Scriptures for references to the stones that are used in the creation of such buildings. And using these scriptures, Peter reminds the followers of Jesus that the church is not a building.

I love the imagery that Peter uses. First he reminds us that the living Christ is the cornerstone on which our church is built. The cornerstone is the first stone set in the construction of a building. All other stones are placed in reference to this stone. The cornerstone determines the position of the entire structure. Jesus the

Christ is our cornerstone; our church is built in reference to the life and the teachings of Jesus. What did Jesus teach? Jesus spoke of the good news of the reign of God, a reign of love and peace and justice. Jesus may have been rejected by the Jewish leaders of his day, but he was precious to the God of Love. He is the rock on which we build our church.

And we are living stones that have been carefully set in place with the cornerstone as our foundation. We are the living stones, the building blocks of our church and together we are, using Peter's words, "an edifice of spirit." We don't need a building in order to be the church. The Spirit resides within each one of us and together we create an impressive edifice of living stone.

What I love about stones is that they come in all shapes and sizes. If you've ever looked at an old building made of field stones, you will have noticed that the builders very carefully place the stones so that they fit together securely. They use the stones that are nearby. They use stones of every shape and colour. Each stone has a place and a purpose. We are those stones. Each one of us has a place in our congregation and a role in the ministry of First United Church

The title slide for today's reflection shows a picture of the Old Stone Church near Abernethy, SK , This church was built in 1892, by volunteer labour, and it is still standing. Of course, what keeps the stones in place is the mortar between them. In a living church, a church built of living stones, that mortar is Love and Relationship, it is the Holy Spirit, the Ground of our Being.

Peter writes this letter to encourage a frightened church to continue their ministry even in the midst of suffering. He reminds them that they are a people of God, God's beloved and that they have the strength to endure and to thrive.

We are the church, a church of living stones, a church with Jesus as our foundation and the Loving Spirit as our mortar. So in this time of COVID-19, in this time when our building is closed to the public, how are we living out our ministry in the world? Yes, we are still worshipping and singing praises to God. Yes, we are still sending in our offerings. Yes we are reaching out to those who cannot be with us via Zoom. But what else is needed? Who else needs to hear and to experience the good news? What can you do to help? Which living stone are you and what part will you play in this ministry?