

“Babes in Arms”
I Peter 2:2-10

A lot of my preacher friends don't have a whole lot of love in their hearts for Mothers' Day. It's not because they have issues with their mothers. It's more of a matter of having to deal with all the cultural expectations which seem to come along with the day. And one of the most burdensome for preachers is that of building a sermon which acknowledges the important place mothers have in the economy of God, without losing the central focus of a sermon, which always needs to be on the Lord Jesus Christ – all He has done for us, and all that He calls us to do for Him. Personally I like the challenge and so I invite you to judge for yourselves just how well I've been able to meld what a blessing our mothers are to us with how central the Son of God is to who we are and what we're to be in Him.

Just to give you a clue at the outset, the underlying theme which I see holding the passage from First Peter together is the set of images he provides concerning the nature and mission of the Church. Unpacking those images provides us with an opportunity to come to grips with what it means for us to belong to the Son of God and to be His followers in the world. Each of the images brings with it implications for how we live out our faith as a community as well as for how we are to carry out the work He has given us to do. The intriguing thing about the pictures the Apostle paints for us in the opening verses of chapter two is that they are probably not the ones we would initially think of, or think of as applying to ourselves. But each one has something to say to us as God's people here at Ken Mawr.

The place to begin is with the fact that we are the Church of Jesus Christ. Who He is defines who and what we are. Peter describes the Son of God as being the 'living Stone' chosen by God and precious to Him. He is borrowing language from the Psalms and the Prophet Isaiah, where the Hebrew Scriptures describe the One who is coming who will accomplish God's plan of salvation, not only for the people of Israel, but for the whole world. The Coming One, the Anointed One, the Christ, the Living Stone, will be the Cornerstone and Capstone, the very Foundation on which all the promises of God will be fulfilled. This living Stone will be the solid Rock on which the Kingdom is built. As the Cornerstone and Capstone He will hold us all together in the Church, each of us in that place where He needs us to be.

But Peter notes that as the living Stone, the Son of God is also the Stone rejected by the builders. The Apostle saw it happen. The religious leaders of the Jewish nation refused to believe and receive Jesus as the Anointed One of God. They set about to have Him executed by Roman authorities. And they succeeded. The Living Stone was put to death. And the Apostle Paul will say of the Lord's crucifixion that it has turned out to be not only a stumbling block to the people of Israel, but foolishness to the Gentile world as well. And Jesus, the Stone rejected, has warned us that if we become His followers we should not expect to be treated better than He was. When the Church of Jesus Christ is true to its Master it can expect to suffer persecution and rejection for His sake.

Peter calls us to be like babes in arms who long to be nursed on the sincere milk of God's Word. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say, especially on Mother's Day, that an implicit image of the Church as a mother figure can be seen here. For it is fairly universally accepted that nurturing is an essential part of mothering. And the primary source of nourishment for our souls is the Word of God, and it is within the context of the faith community that the Word is proclaimed and heard. So, in a very real sense, the Church is the mother of all believers. Because it is through our witness and sharing of God's Word that the Holy Spirit produces saving faith in those who hear and respond to the Good News. And once we have been born again we are nourished and sustained in our faith and life by the fellowship of God's people. The Church is our spiritual mother.

But Peter makes clear as this passage unfolds that the goal of being nourished by the Word is that we might grow up in our salvation. And a mother's job is not complete when she has weaned her little ones and started feeding them on solid food. Beyond nourishing is nurturing, that is, helping children to grow up and mature and become the best people they can possibly be. That same task falls to us as the Church, as together we seek to strengthen and encourage one another in our daily walk with the Lord. In fact, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews laments the fact that his readers are still spiritual infants and need a diet of spiritual milk when they should be feeding on that solid food which is the mark of spiritual maturity. The task of the Church as our mother, our task, is to bring us to maturity in Christ.

The rest of the passage we're looking at this morning goes on to tell us what a mature Church, a healthy and vibrant congregation looks like. Peter describes us as living stones who are being built into a spiritual house. He has in mind the Temple in Jerusalem where the people of Israel gathered to worship the Lord. But Jesus had made clear that a day was coming when that Temple would no longer be the focal point for worship and would, in fact, be destroyed. With the coming of the Holy Spirit the locus of worship has changed. It is no longer a building, it is a community. It is wherever two or three gather in Jesus' name. The Church, our congregation, not our building, exists to be a spiritual house where seekers come and meet with God, offer their prayers and praise, hear the Word, find forgiveness and hope.

But Peter uses that term, 'spiritual house,' in a twofold way. He intends it to convey not only the meaning of a place, but also the reality of a specific family. He writes, "You are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood." Here the word, 'house,' refers to the Israelite tribe from which were chosen those who were to serve as priests for the people. Their primary task was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the worshipers who came to the Temple. Peter says that as a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, we are to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. And in his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul calls us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. We fulfill our calling to be the Church, individually and together, as we put our time and talent and treasure at the Lord's disposal.

Peter elaborates on that theme when he writes, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood.” The Protestant Reformation stressed the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers – which a lot of us would like to think means that we don’t have to confess our sins to anybody but God! In actuality, the fact that we are a holy priesthood means that we are here to share our weaknesses and failings with one another and to assure one another of the forgiveness which is ours in Christ. Our task is to declare the praises of the One who has called us out of darkness into His wonderful light, as we share with one another the blessings which being God’s people and experiencing new life in Christ have brought to our lives. That is an essential part of what it means for us to be the Church, and we need to take it seriously.

Another aspect of being the Church as a chosen people is that together we are a holy nation, we are a people belonging to God. In this world we are, at best, resident aliens. Our identity and our worth are bound up in the fact that we are a people belonging to God. With Memorial Day coming up it is well to remember that God’s Word calls us to be good citizens of the country in which we live. And Christian patriotism involves exerting whatever influence we may have to make sure that our nation’s values and goals are consistent with God’s Word and God’s will. But we ought never to forget that first and foremost we are citizens of the Kingdom of God and that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. We are faithful to our calling as God’s chosen people when keep that distinction clearly in mind.

In this passage I hear Peter and the Holy Spirit calling us, as the Church, to keep in the forefront of our minds the radical difference heeding God’s call has made on our lives. He writes that we have been called out of darkness into God’s wonderful light. Spiritual darkness can take a number of different forms. Sometimes it involves being enslaved to habits and lifestyles which are destructive, not only to ourselves, but to others. But spiritual darkness can also be a matter of wandering around feeling lost, not having a sense of purpose or meaning for one’s life. It can involve hopelessness and despair. It can also be a matter of indifference and apathy regarding the things of God. But faith in Jesus, the Light of the world, and coming to Him, brings freedom and purpose, hope and vitality to all who heed His call.

And it is all a matter of mercy and of grace. Certainly, that’s what life in the Church should always be about. There is no room in the life of God’s people for the kind of critical and judgmental spirit which leads to self-righteousness or a holier-than-thou attitude. The nicest thing you can say about any of us is that we are sinners who have been saved by God’s grace. Whatever good there is in us we owe to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, all the rest we have to take the credit or the blame for ourselves! When we really are being the Church there isn’t a person in the world who ought not to be invited into our corporate life to experience the love and forgiveness, the peace and hope which we have found and been given as we have sought forgiveness and put our trust in the saving work of Christ.

So when it comes time for us to think about how well we're doing as the Church of Jesus Christ, individually and corporately, it's imperative that we know that the Son of God is the solid Rock on which everything we say and do is built, and that it is our common allegiance to Him and to His will which holds us all together. Beyond that we may need to consider whether we're still babes in arms, subsisting on spiritual milk, or if we've been weaned and are chowing down in the solid food found in God's Word. Are we living stones being built into a spiritual house? Do others come to us when they're looking for God? Are we offering our lives as living sacrifices? And how are we doing as a chosen people? Can our friends, neighbors, and family tell who has chosen us and what we have been chosen for?

My dear sainted mother, who went home to be with the Lord on Mother's Day exactly twenty years ago this past week, in one of her less saintly moments said to my dad, "That child has a face only a mother could love!" And maybe that's the bottom line when it comes to a mother's job description, even when that mother is the Church of Jesus Christ! Sadly, the Church, and some human mothers, don't quite measure up to that high standard. There are no perfect mothers and there are no perfect churches. So, we shouldn't be too surprised when even congregations as good as our own, are not quite as loving or faithful as they need to or ought to be. After all, at our best you and I are works in progress – called and chosen, but God is not finished with us, not with us or with the Church, so it is always too soon to give up.

And in fact the best news of all is that even if our mother Church is less than perfect and always in need of more mercy and grace and love, we have a heavenly Father who is perfect and whose mercy and grace and love are boundless. He has called us and chosen us in Christ and He has no intention of ever letting us go. On the contrary, He has every intention of completing the good work the Holy Spirit began in us when we gave our lives to Christ. So be of good cheer! We are loved and forgiven. Once we were not a people, now we are the people of God. Once we had not received mercy, and now that mercy is abundantly ours. So let us, like babes in arms, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it we may grow up in our salvation. Foe in Christ we have tasted that the Lord is good. Amen.