

## **“A Spiritual House (The Jesus Thing)”**

### **1 Peter 2:2-10**

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk,  
so that by it you may grow into salvation.

If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good,  
come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals  
yet chosen and precious in God’s sight,  
and like 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.

For 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.”

To 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,  
and 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.

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 God’s marvelous light.

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.

## A Spiritual House (The Jesus Thing)

1 Peter 2:2-10

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

### I.

For quite a little while now, I have been feeling the pressing need for us, as a church, to do a “check in” with each other. I have been waiting, though, for the right moment to arrive and, more importantly, the right scripture text to emerge. Today’s reading from 1 Peter 2:2-10, I believe, is the right text at the right moment. Before we get to all of that, however, I would like to define our terms a bit; specifically, with respect to the “us” to whom I just referred.

### II.

For those of you who are paying attention, the church is *changing*. Certainly this particular church, *our* church, is experiencing a great deal of change: we are growing in depth and breath, there is an increase in energy, vitality, relevance, possibility and, most important, a significant up-tick in the compassion, caring, and love which has *always* been at the heart of the form and substance of the church on the Park. All the while this has been going on the church, as social institution, has been changing as well; unfortunately, in almost every instance these changes have not been for the better. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Obviously, the question that gets begged is why here, on the Park? What is different about *this* place? Is it just a matter of luck, hard work, divine favor, the right mix of people, or it is simply our turn? Though you may have your own theories, and I’ve contemplated many over this recent span of months, I will tell you mine: its the *theology*.

### III.

Now, I would like to let you in on a secret. If you did a survey of pastors asking them what they least enjoy about their job, I am fairly confident what the most common answer would be (anyone want to venture a guess?): the responsibility of taking care of the physical building (or buildings) and associated grounds. There is *always* something to replace, repair, repurpose or be required. If you do not believe me, just walk into the room back there under the bell tower.

To make matters worse, most people who choose ministry as their professional vocation have little interest in construction, HVAC, DIY repair, or landscaping as an avocation or hobby. Worse, building maintenance is often a budgetary black hole siphoning off time, energy and resources from the congregation's work and mission; which is what most pastors consider the "real work" of the church and why they got into the field in the first place

#### **IV.**

While I, too, would much prefer to focus on building a church rather than on church as the building, I eventually came to accept then, later, appreciate that this is the *job*; both as a necessity for, and symbol of, a healthy and vibrant church. At the other end of the equation is the undue attention to, and even idolatry of, the church building as poor substitute for the actual work and mission of a church.

While this is very evident in the posh and promenade of many large, wealthy congregations, it is even more apparent in small churches struggling with all of their might just to keep doors open and the lights on. So much so, that they are quite willing to let their ministry fail so long as the roof does not. In the extreme, such a church earmarks their savings to preserve the building long after the congregation has faded to obscurity; the hope being that, somehow, as long as the physical structure remains the church lives on, if only in their memories.

#### **V.**

Today's scripture reading from I Peter is, I am sure, primarily about understanding Christ as chosen and precious in God's sight. As companion to this, though, I am equally sure that these first few decades following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were, by necessity, greatly concerned with building up the church, the body of Christ, in the all too real world in which the early followers lived; as evidenced in last week's scripture and sermon.

Likewise, the author of I Peter, almost certainly a titular pseudonym for an unnamed writer, makes great effort to articulate the direct connection between Christ as living stone and the challenge we have, as followers of Christ, to *allow* ourselves to be built into a house that is, first and foremost, *spiritual* in nature; both in form and substance. That is, at the heart of *everything* we do,

be it physical improvements to the building or acts of kindness, support and fellowship, we keep a *spiritual* focus as this is the *only* way that we may grow into salvation

## VI.

Here, then, is our task for the balance of today's sermon: how do we allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual house and, hence, to grow into salvation. In an effort to save us some time, I can tell you these things are *not* accomplished by rehangng the steeple bell, installing playground equipment and wheelchair lifts, fixing the roof (again), refurbishing the fountain in the Park, repurposing an unused room into the warm and inviting Lorna's Lounge, or by the anticipated conversion of the storage room below the sanctuary into a haven for the kids and youth of our church; though these certainly are, and will be, visible signs of inward changes.

No, the only way forward to allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual house, and to grow into salvation is by adopting, exploring and growing the appropriate, that is correct, *theology*. Which, for today's purposes, we will call "The Jesus Thing."

## VII.

Please understand, when I use the phrase "The Jesus Thing" I am not trying to be cute, clever or hip. Instead, I do so in an effort to create space and opportunity in service to a wider latitude and leeway in our meaning, understanding and interpretation. I could certainly stand here for quite a long while today reviewing and revisiting 2000 years of church orthodoxy and dogma as it relates to Jesus, and it is certainly appropriate to do so from time to time (if you think it *is* that time again, please let me know and I will put the matter into the homiletical, or preaching, queue).

That said, my sense is most of us have a pretty good understanding of all that, if only from the creedal and confessional statements we make each and every Sunday as part of our liturgy or worship (which is why we include them). Instead, it is what we choose to *do* with this understanding which is the more fruitful avenue of inquiry.

## VIII.

Over the years, many in our church (and, I'd argue, many outside our church) have come to recognize, acknowledge and marvel that we, as a congregation, endeavor to maintain a Big Tent where people across a wide social, political and theological spectrum are at home and made to feel welcome. This is one of the great strengths of our church.

Last Sunday, in welcoming 12 new members, we became even stronger. One of the things I always stress in every new member class I offer is a citation from the Book of Order, G-1.0301 Right of Judgment:

*That "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men (sic) which are in anything contrary to God's Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable.*

## IX.

Then, immediately upon reviewing this very important tenet of our Presbyterian faith and heritage, I always add, "Not only is this your *right*, it is also your *responsibility*." My job, as minister, is to provide the basics of our faith and theological understanding, as well as the framework which holds them together in a, more or less, cohesive manner. Your job, as the congregation, is to take all that and run with it. You may do so hard and fast, or slowly and deliberately, or only every now and then, or even painstakingly and begrudgingly; regardless, though, run with it you must. Not only is your very own faith at stake and along with it our church, I would also make the claim that the church, as social institution, will wither and die, or live and flourish based, at least in part, on our due diligence in understanding, abiding and promoting "The Jesus Thing"; however *you* understand it.

## X.

Individually, you must seek your own unique understanding of Jesus, doing so within the context of a great many others striving to do the same; sometimes, in ways very different than your own. Let me be absolutely clear, here, I am *not* advocating for a diversity of belief. Instead, I am advocating for a diversity of *expression* which takes root in, and is derived from, the very same belief.

As our tent widens, the center which binds us together, one to another, must necessarily deepen; with that center being “The Jesus Thing. Understand this will not be a linear line of pursuit; there is no straight or clearly demarcated path from point A to point B. In fact, with regard to the faith journey there are only three options: start, keep going, or start again. This is what constitutes the hard work of the faith. But, if we will do the work, the wonders of our faith will be revealed us along the way; and *that*, is how we grow into our salvation and allow ourselves to be built into a *spiritual* house.

## **XI.**

As we move into the future of our congregation, we are going to continue maintaining, repairing and building with real world materials such as stone, brick, mortar, wood, dry wall and carpet. Speaking frankly, this is what is required to keep pace with the vicissitudes of time and of history. In currently finding ourselves in an era of such growth in depth and breath, and such an increase in energy, vitality, relevance, and possibility, it is *imperative* that we make hay while the sun shines so brightly upon us. However, all we have done to date, and all we hope to do in the days ahead, are wholly in service to the spiritual house God is building here on the Park; using each one of us, as living stone, for the building materials.

## **XII.**

For we have tasted that the Lord is good, chosen and precious in God’s sight, and we have come to God with humility and gratefulness to allow ourselves be built into a spiritual house, and a holy priesthood, centered around and grounded in “The Jesus Thing” which uses as its sole measuring stick, the compassion, caring, and love which has *always* been, and forever *must* be, at the heart of the form and substance of this congregation. Amen.