

Year A, Easter 5

May 14th, 2017

1 Peter 2:1-10

Mother's Milk and Rejected Stones

Just as a baby grows from drinking milk from his mother's breast so we grow into salvation as we drink the pure milk of the word. I guess this is a good place to start on Mother's Day.

Salvation is not something that happens to us all of a sudden, like a movement from being "out" to being "in." We are "in" already in as much as we are already loved but this news takes a long time to travel from our heads to our hearts. The process of knowing we are loved and of it making a difference in how we feel involves growing into salvation. We grow into it because it's a dawning awareness that happens as we drink the "pure milk" of the word of Jesus; pure because it contains nothing harmful or poisonous; no hidden agendas, no second thoughts, no mixed motives, just being absolutely "for us" and for our growth. The mother pours herself into her child looking forward to the child's growth.

In response to being loved more than a mother loves her child we can rid ourselves of malice, guile, insincerity, envy and all slander, the negative qualities listed in verse 1. You see, we use all of these unproductive ploys to gain an advantage in our competition for love but now they are not needed because we are discovering we are loved already. To quote Psalms 34:8, "We have tasted how the Lord is good and discover ourselves to be happy as we take refuge in him."

In the footnotes to The New Interpreter's Bible on this passage it says "To achieve this kind of love, the Christian must put aside those vices that destroy community, malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander." I disagree and see it as the opposite. It is because we have tasted God's love and are beginning to know we are loved already that we can give up "malice, guile, insincerity, envy and all slander." Our letting go of old behavior grows out of an emerging new awareness.

We are a community built on a rejected stone as its foundation. Old buildings, before cement, were often built on stones with the floor beams resting on them. The writer says God's new community also rests on a stone, but it is not any stone. It's the stone rejected by the builders. The stone's rejection qualifies it for use as our community's foundation. The world's rejection of Jesus, his execution, makes Jesus the one God needed as a foundation for his new community.

Jesus is a "living stone" though he was rejected and killed. He is living by virtue of the resurrection and because he is able to bring life to the whole of human culture. His death and

then life show him to be chosen of God and incredibly valuable as a communicator of God's love and intention for us.

As Paul Neuchterlein notes, "We build community by throwing someone out. God rebuilds our community by starting with the ones we throw away." Those of us who see how the rejected one becomes the center of a new community are being built, like living stones ourselves, into a spiritual temple. As imitators of Jesus we become living stones too; persons from whom life emanates in our relationships with our families, with our friends, in our communities and in our world.

In fact, the writer of 1 Peter says "You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You notice we don't offer up literal sacrifices, the bodies of others, either animals or humans, thinking this will please God. No, we offer up spiritual sacrifices that involve some form of self-giving. Some examples: We choose in our freedom to let the other win sometimes even though in doing so we look like we have lost. We sacrifice our need to win. Or maybe we let go of our desire to get even though that would make us feel better in the short term. Here we sacrifice our desire for vengeance. Mothers and fathers regularly let go of some of their own desires and even their needs in order to support their children. This is a spiritual sacrifice.

On a larger scale, we as a nation can choose to put to death our desire for dominance over our neighbor within our national consciousness rather than arm against and kill the people of another nation in order to maintain our position in the world. It boils down to "self-sacrifice", a spiritual practice and discipline, rather than sacrificing the other.

It even comes into play in the relationship between the rich and the poor. Perhaps the rich should renounce their desire to have more and more so that the poor can obtain their basic needs for food, shelter and health care. Perhaps we vote for the school tax bond proposal even though our children are grown because we know that children need a good education. Maybe we do this knowing it could jeopardize that expensive vacation we were dreaming of. Perhaps we need to sacrifice that dream.

Spiritual sacrifices have a bearing on economics, politics, and issues of justice. Currently our tax system is skewed toward those who live to have their ever-expanding desires satiated while the basic human need for food, shelter and health care often get ignored. There is a difference between needs and wants and "spiritual sacrifices" may involve renouncing wants so that other's needs can be resourced.

Not that we do so great on this, but this is why Laura and I have chosen to drive our cars into their very old age, buy small houses with little room for expensive furniture and try to live somewhat modestly. Our desires will always exceed our means anyway so why not keep the

bar low so that we have some resources left over to share with those in legitimate need. I know you do things like this as well.

I find it hard to know where the balance is. I think it is an inescapable tension in life that I pray about often. And finally, I know that in the end I am loved no matter what I decide. In some ways that makes it harder.

The writer of 1 Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16 where the text concludes with “the person who believes in him will never be shamed.” To be shamed is to be found out, to be exposed as a fraud, to be revealed as living a lie. God honors those who believe for they are in touch with reality. But for those who refuse to believe, the stone the builders rejected now becomes the stone they stumble over. Those who don’t see the importance of the rejected stone have a blind spot in their vision and that cause them to stumble.

My Honda Element has a blind spot. You can’t see a segment of what is out there because the structural beams of the vehicle get in the way. When you can’t see all of reality you are bound to be surprised. Things hit you “out of the blue.” If you don’t believe that Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, is the capstone you are going to trip over reality. It is just the way it is. A faulty anthropology will inevitably hinder you from seeing the truth and makes you vulnerable to a fall.

But we who believe in Jesus Christ know that real community is built by starting with the ones humans have thrown away, just as it is built on Jesus, the stone the builders rejected. The poor, the broken, the needy, the minority, the ones others reject, and the parts of our selves we reject—these are the foundation stones with which God begins. It is in this light that the writer of 1 Peter says “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God’s own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Once you weren’t a people, but now you are God’s people. Once you hadn’t received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Thanks be to God. Amen.