

“Christ is the Cornerstone. We are the Foundation.”

Stewardship Sunday
Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum
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⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like 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. ⁶For 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." ⁷To 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," ⁸and "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. ⁹But 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 his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:4-10)

On our recent journey through Scotland, we saw a lot of old buildings. As I recall, the oldest one was St. Margaret's Chapel, built high on a rock that is now surrounded by the Castle of Edinburgh. Constructed around 1045, it is still used as a wedding chapel. According to our faithful tour guide David Ireland, it remains a preferred venue for frugal Scottish fathers-of-the-bride, given that it can only seat about twenty guests. Then there was the rustic St. Oran's chapel on the island of Iona, built in the twelfth century, which is also still in use.

But the one old building that really captured my imagination was the grand Cathedral of St. Andrews. Believed to be the largest church ever constructed in Scotland, most of it is now gone. Around 1560, when the Protestant faith became the religion of the realm, almost all Catholic practices ceased nearly overnight. In 1559, the powerful preacher John Knox stepped into the pulpit of the nearby Holy Trinity Church – which we also toured – and delivered a fiery message calling for the removal of all “monuments of idolatry” remaining in Catholic structures. The sermon motivated some especially fervent locals to set out down the street for the cathedral, where they stripped all remaining icons, altars, and other evidences of Catholic liturgy from the interior. In the decades that followed, the wooden roof eventually collapsed from lack of maintenance, bringing most of the side walls down with it. Today, ruins of the two walls at either end remain standing, but the rest of the property is mostly grass and gravestones.

I share this history this morning not just because it is fresh in my mind, but because it speaks to what the first epistle of Peter means when it says we should see ourselves as “living stones” ... that as people of God we are called to allow ourselves to “*be built into a spiritual house [and] a holy priesthood.*” You see, one of the things that John Knox would have seen as idolatrous in his sermon – and something that was almost assuredly ripped out of the cathedral by those who were motivated by that sermon – was an imposing structure known as the “rood screen.” Taken from the Saxon word for cross, a rood screen was a barrier, typically carved from wood or constructed with stone, that separated the nave of the church from the chancel. It served the practical purpose of separating the lay people in the congregation from the area where only the priests could go. The screen nearly



always supported a large figure of Christ being crucified on the cross; hence the term “rood screen.” They were commonly adorned with various statues and icons of saints.

There were several reasons this structure was objectionable to the Reformers. One was its prominent display of icons, which had been venerated – even worshiped -- in ways that the Reformers considered to be idolatrous. But an even bigger issue was that the rood screen literally stood between God and the people. The screen marked a boundary – a part of the church that Catholicism considered too holy for normal people to walk upon – a place where only ordained priests were allowed to go. The Protestant Reformers rejected this idea – the idea that certain people should be lifted up -- elevated in holiness and stature -- to stand between us and God.

By contrast, John Knox and his fellow Reformers preached a very different idea, the concept of a “Priesthood of all Believers.” It is the conviction that anyone and everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ has attained priestly status. Before God, we all stand on the same level, on common ground before God. It also means that, for us, there is only one priest: Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. As our Book of Confessions states, “he himself remains the only priest forever, and lest we derogate anything from him, we do not impart the name of priest to any minister.”¹ So you can see why the rood screen had to go. In Christ, the barrier that stood between God and the people had been torn down. There is no longer any place that is off limits for the priesthood of all believers.

This is what it means for us to be “living stones.” The church that Christ came to create is not a thing that is built with bricks or mortar. It does matter how solidly our buildings are constructed; stones that are stacked by human hands will eventually crumble and fall. But a church built upon a foundation of faith by people of faith... living stones who are willing to be built together into a spiritual house... that will stand forever. Christ is always the cornerstone, and everything good that comes rests upon His strength. The rest – all of the rest -- is us. You and me. All of us.

When we think of the church in this way – when we think of ourselves in this way – it can be transformative. Take, for example, the building just on the other side of that door. The cornerstone outside reads “1924,” the year that construction of the “Church House” was begun. On September 9, 1925, the completed structure was dedicated and commissioned for a new era of mission and ministry. And yes, it was made of stone. But if those stones could speak, what would they say?

I think those walls would speak not of their own strength, but rather the strength of the people who have lived out lives of faith within those walls. Russell Hall is architecturally beautiful, but even more beautiful are the worship services, wedding receptions, coffee hours, concerts, and Advent workshops that have taken place in that room over the last century. The Lindsley Room is a comfortable space, but what is even more comforting is the inspiring story of its namesake Emily Lindsley, our founder, who decided that what her beloved Larchmont really needed was, in her words, “a church in the Reformed tradition.” The church offices upstairs are warm, dry, and functional, but what inspires me is the thought of all the gifted people who have come before us, people who have served faithfully in those spaces – and all the sermons written, the sacred counsel given, the funeral homilies thoughtfully crafted in those offices. The stones around us are nice, but they may change, and eventually, they will fall. But the foundational stories of the people who have lived, loved, and faithfully served in this church? They will stand forever.

That hope is what we lift up on this Stewardship Sunday, as we give thanks for an amazing century of faithful service in the Church House, and look forward with joy and excitement to the next hundred years of mission and ministry. As we look ahead to the year 2125, how can we lean even more completely on Christ as the cornerstone? How can we strengthen ourselves as an

¹ *The Second Helvetic Confession*, §5.154.

enduring foundation of this vital ministry? What does it mean for us to see ourselves as living stones, being built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood of believers?

Three things come to mind – three hints given by these ancient words to a modern church. How can we live into our calling to be living stones, vital parts of what Christ the cornerstone is building here at Larchmont Avenue Church?

Number one -- **we make ourselves more available to God.** It may be obvious to say, but I have to say it: God cannot build with stones that are off building other things. If we want to be a real and vital part of what God is doing here, we have to commit ourselves to being here, being active here. We have to invest real time and energy here. We have to be generous with our money here. When John Wesley preached this passage to his congregations, he said that if we want to be a living stone in God's house, then we have to give ourselves. "Offer it up," Wesley said. Put yourself where your heart longs to be. "Your souls and bodies, with all your thoughts, words, and actions... [give them up] as spiritual sacrifices to God."²

Number two – **we expect God to change us.** A stone is lifeless, but a living stone is, by definition, alive. And to be alive is to change. To be alive is to grow, mature, adapt, and respond to life's changing circumstances.

Getting back to the Cathedral of St. Andrews, you can imagine how many stones fell when a structure of such massive size came crumbling down. But today the site is clear. There are no signs of that rubble. What, you may ask, happened to all of those stones that were once so skillfully hewn and so carefully laid in place? They were carried away for other uses. A great many of them are found not so far away, just down the seaside cliffs, where a strong breakwater now protects the harbor. Each Sunday after chapel, students from the University of St. Andrews continue to this day a centuries old tradition of processing down to the shore and walking the length of that pier in their bright red robes. It is, they say, a powerful experience of bonding that deepens their sense of community and connects them to students past, present, and future. Both there and back, the students pass the ruins of the old cathedral.³

In other words, those stones may have moved from their original position, but even today they are part of the enduring story of life and faith in St. Andrews. To be a living stone is to be ready for that kind of change. A living stone is never stagnant. A living stone remains connected to longstanding tradition, but it is also teachable, adaptable, and willing to embrace new things.

Last, but not least, to be a living stone is to accept that **we are the priesthood.** The morning we landed in Scotland the first thing we did was attend worship at Govan & Linthouse Parish Church near Glasgow. After losing a night of sleep, I will confess that it is possible that I dozed off twice during one of the hymns. But it was still a perfect way to begin our pilgrimage. But we perked up quickly when a group of women in the church invited us up to the fellowship hall for a wonderful lunch. It wasn't fancy – vegetable soup, a variety of sandwiches – but it was delicious. They came around with old-fashioned kettles full of coffee and tea, and then with towers overflowing with Scottish sweets. They had clearly labored long and hard to welcome us so warmly, but that work was not drudgery. For them, it was a labor of love. They obviously derived so much pleasure engaging in an activity as old as faith itself – the responsibility to offer hospitality and safety to wandering strangers who come through their doors. They were serving us, but it felt like such an honor to be in the presence of such joyful and authentic servants. It was clear that we were in the presence of priestesses, true women of the faith who embodied what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ.

² John Wesley's Notes, https://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/notes/notes/1Peter.html#Chapter_II

³ "Path to the Pier: A Walk through History," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK9UPQxtOpI&t=21s>

If we aspire to be living stones, then we are called to embrace that kind of joyful service. In the priesthood of all believers, we cannot sit back and expect others to do the work for us. We are not called to sit on the other side of a massive screen while other people tend to the altar. We are not here to be served; we are here to serve. In other words, we are the work. We are the walls holding this place up. When we understand and embrace this, we open ourselves to the mystical, miraculous discovery that, when we truly invest ourselves in service and commitment, the work is not drudgery. It is a blessing.

That's what Emily Lindsley did when she envisioned a vibrant new church in this community. That's what our forebears did 100 years ago when they built a brand-new space, so that they might truly be a "seven-day church for a seven-day need." And they have passed the baton to us, so that we might continue to be the living, breathing body of Christ in this place.

So, let's make ourselves more available to God. Let's not only be open to God changing us, but let's expect God to change us, move us, and reshape us. And let's not just sit here wondering if something will happen. Instead, let's be a priesthood of believers, sharing together joyfully in the work that God has given us to do.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**