

1 Peter 2:2-10

2:2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-

2:3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

2:4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and

2:5 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.

2:6 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."

2:7 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,"

2:8 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.

2:9 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 his marvelous light.

2:10 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.

Proclamation of the Word

I just read in the Christian Century magazine that, "A Good Friday passion play was called off after the Oxford (England) City Council said the sponsoring church failed to get the proper permit. The council acted on the presumption that the passion play was a live sex show. In a statement of apology, an official said, 'at the time of processing the application, I did not appreciate that this was a religious event.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

On that same page, a survey about the Bible in American Life reveals that 26% of all adults have never read the Bible. With Millennials (18-29) the percentage increases to 39%.

Both are reminders that not only do we live in an increasingly Biblically illiterate society, but a religiously illiterate world, too. When city leaders think that a passion play at a church is an X-rated show, rather than the telling of the Passion of Jesus Christ, that tells us something. Many of us grieve when the church had a place of stature and prominence in society. In first grade we said a blessing before lunch every day. I still say that blessing that Ms. Patsy Alexander taught us. But after first grade I never remember praying in school as a class except at High School graduation. For my parents, who would be 80, it was a different WASP kind of world growing up in the upstate of South Carolina. WASP is White Anglo Saxon Protestant. While some grieve, others are celebrating that the church can be more authentic with a more distinct faith identity rather than just what nice people do- go to church. Now I know we live in the buckle of the Bible belt, but that may make us too smug thinking that we can catch faith like a common cold, just because it is in the air.

The church on the edge of the Roman Empire to whom Peter is writing knew what it was like to be a fringe group who followed Jesus and professed the Christian faith in a pagan world. I can only liken it to what it would be like to grow up Buddhist or Hindu in my small southern hometown, where the most exotic folks were the Catholic nuns that ran the local Divine Savior hospital or Herb Kirsh, a Jewish man, who owned the local

department store in Clover, SC. In this letter, Peter or his secretary, addresses the people as "resident aliens." They are foreigners, strangers. The locals were confused by their strange practices and beliefs. And they were suffering for being who they followers of Christ.

It is hard for us to imagine suffering persecution for our faith, maybe the closest thing we can imagine is simply being ignored by society, not persecuted. The larger world we live in does not usually treat Christians with disdain or disapproval- they just know little about who we are, trusting only what they see in the media which are the extremes. But we do live in a world that is antagonistic to our Christian faith and practice, it is just more subtle. We make choices about our money, our time, our leisure, and our priorities in a secular, consumer society which demands our fidelity and loyalty to our team, our portfolio, our social climbing and status. So maybe the words of this letter are not so far off. We need a reminder of who we are as we live out this gift of life given by God.

Peter reminds the church that we are God's precious, chosen possession. We belong first to God, and we belong to one another as God's people. Our purpose is to "proclaim the mighty acts of God." Listen again to verses 9-10 the big finish after the crescendo.

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2:10 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.ⁱⁱ

To put it another way. You and I matter not because of who we are, but because of who God is. We are special because God chose to call us his own. That is not a privilege to exploit or ignore, but a joy and a calling- to be holy. Holy in the most basic meaning is "to set apart." God set us apart to for a purpose. Most people think to be holy is to be perfect, but it is not. It is to be set apart for God's purposes. Even though we have lots of growing up to do. Whether we are 9 or 90 we can still be fed on spiritual milk because growing up into Christ is a life-long process. In the church the word we use for this growing up process is "sanctification." We can make holiness a complicated pursuit or we can simply seek to let our lives preach. Another way of proclaiming the mighty acts of God is this "Let your life preach. "

Some wonder what is the point of being holy? If we are saved eternally, what is the point? Believers who seek to love God with heart, mind and soul, will also want to love others as they love themselves. Holiness is not a payment for salvation. It is a response of thankful living in the grace of God. Sanctification is how we let our life preach.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way,

To make bread or love, to dig in the earth, to feed an animal or cook for a stranger — these activities require no extensive commentary, no lucid theology. All they require is someone willing to bend, reach, chop, stir. Most of these tasks are so full of pleasure that there is no need to complicate things by calling them holy. And yet these are the same activities that change lives, sometimes all at once and sometimes more slowly, the way dripping water changes stone. In a world where faith is often construed as a way of thinking, bodily practices remind the willing that faith is a way of life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Grow in Church

Faith is a way of life. Peter calls us living stones. Living stones are rooted in God's ordinary yet magnificent creation. This is not a mentality of escaping the real world, it is a theology of getting down in the dirty, daily stuff where we live. We are not waiting on the sweet bye and bye and pie in the sky, this is holiness that values the stuff of daily life. The living stones are built into a household of God where abundant life can grow and are sent back out into the world to bring new life, light in darkness, and hope in despair.

And just as babies growing on spiritual milk are raised by families, we grow in faith in a family of faith. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people. In a world of individualism, Christians are part of communities of faith. The church is meant to be a sign of Christ's presence in the world. No one of us can be the good news all the time, but we are stronger together. Just like character is caught not taught. Christianity can be described the same way. As the poem goes, Children do learn what they live. Christians learn what they live. Start following Jesus to get to know him, and you will learn to trust him.

Let your Life Preach

When I was a little girl, it was typical for my dad to pull out the checkerboard and challenge one of my brothers or me to a game. Now checkers is a pretty simple game. You try to reach the other side of the board while jumping and capturing your opponents' checkers. Oh and then you can get crowned if you reach the far side of the board. Once you have been "kinged" as we called it, (I always asked to be queen-ed), you could move all over the board taking down the other's men.

I was probably in 2nd grade when I asked to play too. I had watched my Dad and brothers play enough. I always got beat over and over again. I was very frustrated. I wanted to give up. I would ask my dad to be easy on me, but he would not. After making a good move and taking a couple of my checkers, he would simply say "Watch what I did." And he would review the play. Over and over, he would say, "Watch what I did." It was better than explaining it to me. He had to show me. I had to practice. I am now a much better checker player.

If he had just told me what to do, I would not have caught on. In fact, it is hard to explain the game and strategy.

Jesus said, "You want to be my disciple, follow me." Watch what I do. Go where I go. Watch my moves, how I behave, handle conflict, remain true to my calling, heal the sick, go about my Father's business. Let your life preach as Jesus' life preached. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, "Be a word about the Word before you say a word." (Repeat)

I learned to worship, as my mother walked me through the steps and expected me to pay attention. She opened the bible as we read along with the minister. She didn't doodle on her bulletin or check her email and text, she showed me how to worship.

I learned to serve by serving, as my youth leader called on me to help deliver Angel gifts to our needy neighbors at Christmas, put on a day camp for the little kids, and help teach Sunday School even though I was in the 9th grade.

I learned to read my bible as a devotion, not by being told to, but by seeing my Grandma read her Bible each night before she went to sleep or first thing in the morning. I saw her pray. She didn't tell me to read my Bible, but I knew she was the most honest, kind, joyful and peaceful person I knew. I wanted to be like her.

The church does not need to moan about the loss of status and influence we have, remembering the good ol' days. Instead, it is time to claim that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called to proclaim the mighty acts of God. And we can start by letting our lives preach as we teach by example in our homes, in our pews, out in the real world.

We have learned through this master planning process that one shared top priority is to share the good news with children, youth, and college students. To pass the faith to the next generation, we have to invest in them with our buildings and our presence. While parents are the number one influence on a child's faith, loving, faithful adults who spend time with them in youth group or class or mission projects are the second most influential. So thanks to all who allow God to preach through their lives. Thanks to all who will serve at Bible school next month, who teach our classes of all ages, who bring their kids to church to be a part of God's people, who will go on our Youth trips this summer, who give money regularly to provide for them, who plan and prepare. You are living stones who preach with your lives the mighty acts of God.

The other top priority is outreach and concern for our neighbors. Thanks to all who witness faithfully serving meals on wheels, work on Boards, walk for water, and more. The list is too long to mention. I would say that Fort Hill Church has its priorities straight. Sharing the good news with one another, especially the young, and serving our neighbors in need.

We are God's people. We have received mercy. Let us recommit to let our life preach keeping our eyes on Jesus, the one we follow forward in faith.

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ⁱ Christian Century, May 14, 2014, p. 9.

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 2:9-10

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor - *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (2010).