

Living Stones
1 Peter 2:4-10

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God is in the business of building. God is building His church in the world. Since the resurrection, God has built the church on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. But God is not using bricks and mortar and stone to build as we do. God is building a spiritual house using living stones. God builds using people. God builds using those who believe in Jesus Christ and his resurrection.

When St. Francis of Assisi heard the words “rebuild my church” coming from the figure of Christ hanging in the Chapel of San Damiano, he took the words literally and set himself to the task of rebuilding the chapel. But as the chapel itself was being physically rebuilt, Francis was joining with other brothers in a life of poverty, prayer, and preaching. As his brotherhood grew, he came to understand that Christ’s call was not just about finding stones with which to rebuild San Damiano, but about living stones, flesh-and-blood stones, people which God would build into a spiritual house.

God was building in the time 1 Peter was written to the church; God was building in the time of St. Francis; God is building now. You have heard the rather dismal statistics regarding church growth among mainline denominations in the United States. Did you know that 3500 new churches are opening somewhere in the world every week? The Church in China is adding 28,000 converts daily. The estimated Christian population in the People's Republic is between 25 and 50 million. The Church in Africa is adding about 20,000 people daily. Below the Sahara, the continent is believed to be about 40 percent Christian. South Korea is about 30 percent Christian. The largest Presbyterian Church in the world is in Seoul, South Korea. A hundred years ago, it had no Protestant churches.¹ God is at work in places that seemed impossible to build a church. God is building by adding people. Living stones built together to make a spiritual house. Peter wants the persecuted group to whom he is writing to know that God will build the church and that no earthly power can prevail against it. Peter wants us to know what the church that God is building can and should be.

First of all, he wants us to understand that **God’s construction starts upon the foundation of Jesus Christ**, the living stone, the cornerstone of all God has built. Come to Him, our text from 1 Peter implores us, and be built as a church upon Him. A stone is a good metaphor for Jesus. A stone is dependable, solid, immovable, strong, a good and sturdy foundation. Jesus is the rock on which the church has been built.

We, as part of the church of Jesus Christ, must remember that Jesus is our only sure foundation. All we do and all we say must come out of the reality of his love and grace, of his life, death, and resurrection. Do you know any churches that have traded Jesus for another cornerstone? They are built on money or prestige. They are built centered on this issue or that, rally against this or for that. Some are built on their reputation for specialized mission or ministry. Some have become a social club and exist only for the needs of its members. Some are built upon of a foundation of tradition and will never change. Some have no grounding whatsoever and float with the whims of culture. Some have become havens of self-help and pop-psychology.

I have been to a church worship service where Jesus was never even mentioned. Can you believe that? The church must be built on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, on the belief that He is our strength; He is our reason for being; He is our message to the world. Jesus is, as he said in our reading from John 14 today, the Way, the Truth and the Life. If we lose him we will go the wrong way. If we lose Jesus, we will fall for lies. If we lose Jesus we will die.

During my first year as an associate pastor in San Angelo, the Vacation Bible School director quit two weeks before it was to take place. I had to pick up the ball, the disorganized, dysfunctional ball that was our VBS that year. We expected 50 kids. 75 came. No one knew what they were doing or where to go. As our VBS was held outdoors at Lake Nasworthy, the mosquitoes and fire ants came too, in large numbers. We made it through the week, barely, and even though all turned out okay in the end, I was not pleased. That is until I heard from one of the mothers of a three-year-old who attended. She reported that her daughter, Kendall, came home Friday afternoon from VBS, and was questioned by her father about VBS. "What did you learn?" he asked her. "I learned that Jesus loves me," she replied with confidence. Though disorganized, though rough in places, I knew we had been a success, because our ministry was centered and grounded on Jesus Christ. Everything we do in the church, our worship, our fellowship, our study, and our mission should lead to the same conclusion: that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord of all and that he loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

Once we have our firm foundation in Jesus Christ, **God builds up the church using people who believe in Him.** We are the living stones. Each one here is a stone in the structure of our spiritual building. Each stone is needed. Those who lead as members of the Session, those who teach, musicians, ushers, cooks, groundskeepers, organizers, cleaners, encouragers,

those who do mission, children, youth, and adults, every one who gives of their time, money, and talent as a member of this church is a living stone and a much needed part of this incredible building. Each stone makes the church stronger, higher, more functional. Each one of us is needed to make the structure what it needs to be. There is no isolated Christianity. There is no isolated, one-on-one relationship with Jesus. When we believe we become part of this incredible spiritual house that God is building. Each one of us is needed to dream, to crave, to work, and to give for the growth of the church. Each one of you, in this sanctuary this morning, is needed to make Harundale Presbyterian Church what God is calling us to be. Your age, your gender, your race, your past faithfulness is inconsequential to God. You are called to be a vital part of this building.

It is hard for some people to believe that they are that needed in the church. In our minds it borders on egotistical to think that the church needs our gifts and resources. But it does. Peter reminds us that we are chosen to be members of the church. God has chosen us to be his people built up together. That means God has chosen you to be a vital part of his church, of this church. I think we have lost the idea that we are unique and distinctive people in the world with a special calling. If we lose our identity, Pope Benedict pointed out this week, we will lose our effectiveness.

We are together, Peter continues, a royal priesthood. A priest is someone who brings Christ to the world and the world to Christ. We are needed to bring Christ into every situation we enter and to lift every situation in which we find ourselves up to the Lord. We are to bring every person with whom we have contact before God's throne for healing, for wisdom, for faith, or for strength. There aren't enough and will never be enough clergy in the world to be the priests that the world needs. All believers, as the church, as the spiritual house which God is building, must be priests.

We are a holy nation. We are holy, set apart, different from the world. We do things differently. We act differently. We have different priorities and standards. To be living stones we act like our living cornerstone. Bishop Desmond Tutu was asked by Tony Campolo why he was Anglican. Jokingly Tony asked the Bishop why he wasn't Baptist. He said, "In the USA, most black people are Baptist." The Bishop then explained why he had become an Anglican priest.

In the days of apartheid, when a black person met a white person on the sidewalk, the black person was expected to step off the pavement into the gutter to allow the white person to pass, giving the white person this gesture of respect. "One day," the Bishop said, "when I was just a little boy, my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man,

dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!”

The Bishop said, “I was more than surprised at what had happened and I asked my mother, ‘Why did that white man do that?’ My mother explained, ‘He’s an Anglican priest. He’s a man of God, that’s why he did it.’ When she told me that he was an Anglican priest,” said Bishop Tutu, “I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, “I wanted to be a man of God.” An Anglican, holy, set apart from the culture in which he lived, chosen and committed to a life of priesthood, led to the addition of another living stone in God’s great building.

We are the church. You and I are the living stones to be used by God to create and sustain the church. The foundation is Christ, but we are the living walls, the living windows, the living rafters, the living pews. Our prayers, presence, gifts, service and all we are make up the materials the Master Builder uses to construct the church and keep it in good repair.

Each time you pray for the church, you lay down a mighty beam of support. Each time you are present, you provide another window through which the light and love of God can shine. Every gift you give creates another wall, another room in which God’s people can gather to be nurtured, healed, and empowered. Each service you render is material the Holy Builder takes and uses to create the holy building. When you invite a friend to the Lord, you bring another stone. We are a stronger building with each living stone added and working in the structure of the whole.

There was a church not too long ago in which each person or family had to bring a lamp to services and hang it on a column beside their pew. You see, they did not have electricity. When each person, each family was there with their lamp, there was such light, such brightness everywhere. How easy it was to tell, however, when someone was absent – there was a pocket of darkness.ⁱⁱ

What kind of stone are you? Is Jesus Christ your foundation? Are you living and vibrant in the work of the church? Are you useful and supportive? Are you adding to its structure? Are you an integral part of this incredible dwelling God is building? If not, you are needed. You are wanted. You are chosen. Let us allow God to build us living stones into a magnificent structure: the church of Jesus Christ, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. *O Lord, build us up.*

ⁱ Chandler, Russell. *Racing Toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future.*

ⁱⁱ Mitchell, Bass. *Hot Springs, VA.*