

Rev. Lisa Schrott
May 5, 2023
1 Peter 2:2-10
Living Stones

The last two weeks have been special services in the life of the congregation - led by the Green Team and our Youth. Tough acts to follow. This week we also mark a special event in the life of the church - our 59th birthday, which was technically celebrated on May 4 (may the force be with you!). For those of you who have hit the 59 mark, you know what is coming - we will turn 60 next year. This morning I want to begin the process of preparing for that joyful occasion by looking a bit at the legacy of our first 59 years.

Our scripture this morning comes from the book of 1 Peter, which begins with these words: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

We are still in the season of Eastertide – a season where we celebrate this new birth into a living hope – the new hope we have through resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is through the lens of this new birth and a living hope that we hear these words that shape our understanding of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of our faith, and we, as living stones that build a spiritual house. The Word of God from 1 Peter chapter 2.

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."

This honor, then, is for you who believe, 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 people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his 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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Last week Sunday afternoon I attended the final service of Plymouth Congregational Church. The church was birthed in 1847, founded by "seven stout souls" sent from the Connecticut Home Missionary Society. Shortly thereafter three of the seven moved away, and the remaining four were divided into two factions who could not, or would not, cooperate with each

other. A Dutch Reformed Pastor was brought in and gave it a try, but he ended up with only one participant. In December 1847, the Presbyterians gave it a try and organized a four-member church in downtown Lansing. Throughout the ensuing years, the few Congregational members decided that Presbyterianism was not for them and continued to meet on their own. And in the spring of 1864, the two groups split, forming the Franklin Street Church – a Congregational church that became Plymouth Congregational and First Presbyterian Church, Lansing. The final service for Plymouth Congregational Church was held at First Presbyterian, coming full circle.

I'm not sure what prompted me to attend this service last Sunday afternoon. Maybe it was the heartfelt email from the pastor Bob Higle. Or maybe a nudge from the Holy Spirit as I was mulling our legacy here and praying for the future of our congregation, as I read what can be disheartening statistics about the demise of the "C" church and the rise of those who have less affiliation or no affiliation to denominational religion. I was prepared to come away depressed from the service or even having my anxieties deepened as a stalwart church that once had 1500 members was ceasing to meet as a congregation after 176 years. But boy was I wrong! It was a beautiful and uplifting service that truly spoke to what it means for a church to be **ministry** – to have a legacy– to be a healing and transformational agent in a city that had seen so many changes in the last 176 years. In 1847, Lansing, then known as "Michigan" became the state capital, 10 years after Michigan became a state. While in the course of our Christian history, 176 years is a blip in time. However, for this region, it is truly a significant legacy.¹

The worship service recognized this legacy in multiple ways. The Prayers of Invocation walked us through Words of Certainty from Paul's letter to the Romans, Words of Compassion from Psalm 23, Words of Adventure from Genesis, and Words of Thanksgiving from the Gospel of Luke. Certainty – Compassion – Adventure – Thanksgiving. This is our call to discipleship – the formation of a new identity with Christ as the cornerstone. This is a new identity that is personal to each follower of Christ, being called out of darkness into the marvelous light. And it is a communal identity: those who follow Christ become a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

The apostle Peter – the disciple Peter who matured from the one who denied knowing Jesus after his arrest, the one who Jesus had to ask three times if he understood that loving Jesus meant feeding his lambs, tending his sheep and feeding his sheep – that Peter has now written a letter – or possibly one of Peter's pupils who is carrying on his legacy – writes this beautiful missive about how to be Christ's disciple in a world that doesn't always recognize the values to which Christ calls us. There were significant social tensions for those followers of Christ who were more comfortable in the Greco-Roman culture than the culture of the Hebrew heritage of the early apostles. Peter is trying to translate the foundations of faith into language they can better appreciate.

¹ Adapted from The Earliest Beginnings of Congregationalism, 1847-1864. From *the 75th Anniversary Booklet 1864-1939, Plymouth Congregational Church*. Included in the bulletin for the Final Service for the Shutting Down of Plymouth Congregational Church, April 30, 2023.

The early churches were scattered – physically away from the center of religious life in Jerusalem. The people were scattered, living intermixed with those who did not follow Jesus or even know who Jesus was. The political winds were complicated, with duties and obligations to emperors and governors, and yet an allegiance to a higher authority in God. Peter wants to give the people encouragement. Don't give up! Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood. You have been called out of darkness into the marvelous light. You have been called from fear into hope. You have been called from hoarding your resources to sharing your blessings. You have been called to love your neighbor, even if you think the neighbor has got it all wrong.

That's a tough call for the people of Peter's time and it is a tough call for each one of us. But Peter reminds the people that their own faith, and the collective faith of the church, are built on a cornerstone that will not fail. The cornerstone is none other than Jesus Christ.

Around the time that 1 Peter was being written, the colosseum in Rome was being built. I remember the first time I went to Rome, walking through the colosseum –amazed that a building this old still was still there. Yes – some of the top and sides had fallen in over the last 2000 years, but the foundation is still standing. Builders of that era knew that the key to a long standing building was the foundation, and particularly the cornerstone. The cornerstone is the first stone that is set in the construction of a building. All other stones are set in reference to this stone as the building is being constructed.

One of my guilty pleasures is watching the TV show Extreme Homes. Each episode features a half dozen or so homes perched in crazy locations or shaped like snakes or eggs or with cool features like walls made out of plants or indoor streams and pools. My favorite ones are the treehouses – a throwback to my love of the Swiss Family Robinson book from my childhood. I am amazed that one can create a multi-room home in the branches of trees. The thing that all these extreme homes have in common is a solid and deep foundation. In fact, in each episode they spend a good amount of time explaining how the foundation was poured and how deep the steel posts are to support the building. It is something that can't be seen when you are looking at the house, but it is so important because without that foundation, the house will careen off the cliff or fall out of the tree as soon as there is a big storm.

The foundation, the cornerstone is what the rest of the building is dependent on. The size and shape – the very identity of the building is shaped by the cornerstone. And from that cornerstone emerges living stones, "like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood."

As we recognize our 59th birthday and look toward turning 60 next May, this is a time to be intentional about our call to be living stones, anchored by Christ, our cornerstone. Throughout the next 12 months, there will be opportunities for us to look back, reflect on our legacy and celebrate the ways in which we have been ministers of grace, compassion and sometimes challenge, to a world where a word of love needs to be heard. In June we will hear about our

legacy of welcoming new neighbors, through work with refugee communities. This summer our worship services will be oriented around a theme of “belonging and building community,” including looking at some of the ways the PCO community has been shaped through the years by the incredible diversity of gifts the members and friends of the congregation bring together. This morning I want to briefly highlight two of the *living stones* of our PCO community – our endowment and our music program.

In the PC(USA), the first Sunday in May is designated as Legacy Sunday – what used to be known as Will’s Emphasis Sunday – the Sunday Presbyterian pastors are encouraged to remind congregation members to include the church in their wills and estate planning. Earlier this year, the Endowment Committee invited Steve Keizer from the Presbyterian Foundation to share about the process of establishing your legacy through charitable estate planning. He provided us copies of *Composing a Legacy*. If you did not receive one, or need additional ones, hard copies can be found in the magazine rack by parking lot doors in Fellowship Hall. There will also be a link to electronic version on the Give page on our website. The *Composing a Legacy* guide reminds us that “estate planning offers Presbyterians the opportunity to make an enduring statement of faith. This act of stewardship can leave an indelible mark on your Church or a mission program of your choice.”²

This principle certainly rings true for us here at PCO, particularly with gifts from the estate of Chris Doemel. In his letter to the congregation sharing the news of gift from the estate of Chris, former pastor, Dr. Rob Carlson wrote,

“Before Chris was diagnosed with cancer, he spoke of the money he initially gave to the church as ‘seed money’. Chris hoped his giving would spur others in our congregation to examine our own treasures and commitment to the Christian faith. He hoped that such examination, grounded in gratitude to God, revealed in prayer, and lived in faith, would serve this church well into the future. Chris intended to enjoy the fruits of his gifts while he was still a young man. Cancer hanged that hope, but not the depth and breadth of his love for this church and its people. ... Chris’ father Bill Doemel, spoke of how joining this congregation fundamentally changed Chris’ life. “He valued the opportunity to join with others and make music...was pleased to make meaningful contributions to the leadership of the church as an Elder... and he was grateful to have conversation partners in the church where he learned about his faith.”³

This is what celebrating our legacy is all about. Yes, there are quite tangible elements that we recognize from the financial gifts of our legacy. Our ability to livestream this service is a powerful reminder of what Chris’ financial gifts to the church mean on a practical level. And yet, as someone who never had the joy of knowing Chris personally, I am very drawn to the values that Chris’ father illuminated about him – his love for the people of the congregation, his

² <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/10011-PFD-Composing-a-Legacy-Rebrand-F-nocrops.pdf>

³ Letter from Dr. Rob Carlson to the PCO congregation dated October 12, 2017.

ability to deepen his faith, to grow in leadership, and to share his love and passion for the music ministry of this church.

We started our worship this morning with Marlene playing *When in Our Music God is Glorified* for the prelude, which we then sang. Hear these words again from the third verse,

“So has the church, in liturgy and song, in faith and love, through centuries of wrong, borne witness to the truth in every tongue: Alleluia!”⁴

This friends, is our work, as “living stones.” We testify to the power of Christ as our cornerstone, and our call to be Christ’s body as “living stones” every time the organ strikes a note, and every time we sing to the glory of God.

Last week we heard our Youth Instrumental Choir serve as our *living stones*. In a few weeks, we will recognize the gifts of the handbell choir in helping us glorify God through music. In a few minutes you will hear our choir director, the freshly graduated, Dr. Colleen Chester, give a moment of gratitude for our Chancel Choir, and recognize our MSU Scholarship choir singers and section leaders. I want to personally thank Marlene, Colleen, and all of our Chancel choir members for their service as *living stones*. And I want to encourage us all to dig deep in praying about our individual calls, and our communal call, to be *living stones* as the church approaches its 60th birthday.

This fall we will spend some time in purposeful strategic visioning, dreaming about the places we will go. What are the mountains we want to climb? Where are breaches we are called to repair? Who are the friends we have yet to meet? Whose lives will be touched – whose hearts healed – whose minds enriched by our ministry? There will be many opportunities in the next year for us to both celebrate our legacy, the shoulders we stand on, the relationships we have made as well as to share our gifts, dreams, hopes, and visions for the future. The June Grapevine will feature more information about how you can be involved. So to quote Dr. Seuss,…”be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea, You’re off to Great Places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So...get on your way!”⁵ Join me in prayer....

⁴ Fred Pratt Green, text. *When in Our Music God is Glorified*; Hope Publishing Company, 1972.

⁵ Dr. Seuss. *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* Random House, 1990.