

Living Stones in the Unfinished Church
Nutana Park Mennonite Church
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
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Scripture: 1 Peter 2:4-10
Luke 19:37-40
Psalm 31:1-5

We gather this morning to worship once again in an unfinished church building, a building under construction. Most obviously, the floors in this sanctuary where we are gathered are still waiting to be revitalized and redone. But this is not to say that there hasn't been progress on this project – far from it! The change over this past week has been phenomenal, with the new flooring and carpet in the education wing coming together beautifully. Various individuals have come in to reinstall baseboards, to clean and put things back where they belong, to feed the volunteers, to offer your prayers and financial gifts for the renovation project. Things are nearing completion, with Helen's and my offices now put back together – for the most part.

Believe it or not, I've enjoyed beginning my role as co-pastor here in the midst of this renovation project. Sure, it's been chaotic, but it's also been exciting. I've gotten to meet more of you than I ordinarily would have as you've been here to lend a hand or drop off snacks or simply have a look around. I've been able to observe a bit of how you work together as a community, the passionate sense of ownership over this space as OUR building, the sense of wanting to renovate and revitalize and renew this space for now and for the future. In a sense it's been very fitting for me to arrive and begin my work here, in an unfinished church.

With all of this building going on, I turned to the Bible this week and looked at all the construction imagery which appears throughout – and there’s certainly no shortage of it. Those ancient Israelites were industrious builders, that’s for sure! There are instructions for how to build altars to God out of uncut stones, the ark in the story of Noah, the Tabernacle for worship, then the (first) Temple during the time of the Kings. Then the Temple is destroyed during the time of the Babylonian Exile (about 600 years before Jesus’ time), so there are instructions for rebuilding it. They build all kinds of things in the Bible, and often God tells them how to do it; they do it according to God’s detailed blueprints.

Our main scripture passage for today comes from 1st Peter 2, where we find construction imagery – specifically the imagery of stones, a much more common building material than wood in the arid Middle Eastern climate. And it’s used in some very interesting ways. Starting in verse 4, we read, “Come to him [Jesus], 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, 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.’

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,’ and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall” (vv. 4-8a).

Here we have layers of building imagery, but strikingly, it’s not used to talk about literal building projects of the kind we’re so familiar with around here at Nutana right

now. Instead, it's used as a profound metaphor for the people of God. It thus shifts our focus from holy building projects – from brick-and-mortar temples – to the gathered people.

Now it's believed that this letter was written at the time of the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in about 70 C.E. This precipitated a profound crisis of faith and identity for the Jewish and early Christian communities. It signified the devastating loss of their central place of worship, the place understood as where God resides, the place where the people of Israel gathered to worship and meet God. Its destruction would have prompted questions concerning whether God was absent or had left them, or where they could now go to meet God. In response to such a crisis, it would have been poignant for the writer of this letter to remind the believers that God does not dwell in an opulent building made of massive, polished stones, but rather builds a dwelling place among them, the people. This is therefore a reassurance that even without the temple, even when it lies in ruins, God is still present with the people, dwelling within and among them.

And the cornerstone, the stone that holds it all together, is the seemingly insignificant Jesus of Nazareth, the “Living Stone” upon whom the people are built by God into a spiritual temple. Playing on the sense of stones as dead, inert objects, the writer uses the paradox of Christ and the believers as “living stones,” describing a building made of flesh-and-blood and faith, a living, breathing temple of the community or family of faith. It reminds us and reaffirms Jesus' promise: “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also.” As it says in an old hymn (Hymnal, a Worship Book #309): “Built on the rock the church doth stand, even when steeples are falling. . .

. The One whom heavn's cannot contain chose here among us to remain, built in our bodies a temple.”

And we know this, too. This focus on the people of the church community rather than our physical church buildings has historically been part of the reason for our simple church buildings in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. I'm reminded of Mennonite theologian Harry Huebner, who speaks of the church as primarily the people, not the buildings. He says, “We don't GO TO church on Sundays – the church GATHERS on Sundays.” In other words, we don't HAVE a church – we ARE the church. The church is in our relationships to one another, our acts of care, of loving God and neighbour. That's how we're built into the Body of Christ that is the church.

If we shift our focus in this way, there is a sense in which the church is never really “finished” – that we want it to remain unfinished. As living stones in the image of our living Cornerstone, we are part of a living and life-giving tradition, and God calls us to invite the next generations of our church family – and the next generations after that – into it. God's spiritual building project is thus never completed – it carries on as God continually creates and renovates and builds onto this living, breathing “building.” Maybe that gets at what Jesus was talking about when he asks in Matthew 7:9, who among us would give a child a stone when he or she asks for bread – who would give a child a dead and ossified and fossilized faith when he or she has asked for something nourishing and life-giving, the encouragement that he or she is also one of God's living stones, to be built into the temple of God's people?

Now at this point, I might have you a bit confused. Some of you might even be uncomfortable. What exactly am I suggesting – that this building, this renovation isn't important? That all of this sweat and toil and effort hasn't been worth it? Of course not! To place the emphasis on the people, the community as the church is in no way meant to detract from the importance of this space. This building is where we gather as a church community – where we gather to worship, to struggle with tough questions together, to share our lives with one another, to host each other. Though it is not the only one, it is one place where God is present to us as we're present to each other. This is in many ways our church home, a place of welcome and belonging. The passionate deliberations and discussions I've witnessed about details of this building and the renovation speak to its importance to us – it is indeed a sacred space, the place where we as “living stones” are built up together.

This brings us to our passage from Luke 19, which is interestingly one of the many instances of Jesus going to Jerusalem to visit the Jewish Temple there – itself proof that our buildings of worship are important! In Luke's telling of Jesus' story, this constitutes Jesus' humble final entrance into Jerusalem, and it happens just before he goes and “cleanses” the Temple of those who are misusing it, the moneychangers and merchants there. As Jesus enters the city on a donkey, a crowd gathers and begins to praise God together “joyfully,” “saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’” Aside from being a clear echo of the song sung by the angels to the shepherds way back when Jesus was born, this loud and joyful noise is disturbing to some of the Pharisees, who complain to Jesus.

Some of them “said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’” And Jesus answered “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Lk. 19:39-40).

If these were silent, the stones would shout out.

What a remarkable image – even the stones being moved to praise God, to break their silence to witness to God’s peace, to fill in for the crowd shouting their “Hosannas.” But isn’t that precisely what this building does for us? When we are scattered during the week and this building stands mostly empty or completely empty, doesn’t it still provide a witness to God’s gathering of this community of faith, to what God is building among us and out of us as living stones? I like to think that even when empty, this church represents our presence in this neighbourhood, foreshadowing the times when we will again gather to worship, share, host, and be present to one another. I like to think that this building represents welcome and sanctuary and belonging. In this sense, even when we are not gathered here, these stones “shout out” our story of faith, of relationship with God and each other.

It’s no accident, then, that God is often called our “rock” in the Bible, an image of divine strength and shelter. So we read in Psalm 51 of the Psalmist’s reliance on God as a “rock” and “refuge” – “In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me. Take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God” (Ps. 31:1-5). In this passage – one of 59 references

to God as “rock” in the Bible, we are encouraged to see God as a place of safety and protection, as our shelter from danger, keeping us from harm like a comforting parent. Interestingly, God here provides sanctuary for us, perhaps when we have nowhere else to go. God is our “living stone” here, rescuing us and preserving our very lives.

Yet we are called to likewise be “living stones”: we are in the image of God, our Rock, and Christ, the Living Cornerstone. Together, in this place, we are called to likewise seek and provide sanctuary or “safe space” for each other: for those of us who are hurting; for those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer; for those of us wrestling with difficult faith questions; and so on. In this way, the church, God’s building of “living stones” provides what one of my biblical commentaries called “a home for the homeless”¹ (both literally and figuratively). What a profound image and calling!

As I’ve joined in the conversations and witnessed the work of this renovation of our church building here at Nutana Park Mennonite Church, there’s one last thing that’s been remarkable to me: the way many of you are taking the “long view” on this project. More than once, I heard people ask questions such as, “what about in 25 years...?” Decisions about and changes to this space have been made in the hope that they will last for decades to come, that this place will remain a home, a sanctuary, a safe and sacred space for the coming generations of this church family. What a gift to be able to hope and plan for the future in this way, since we are a wonderfully multi-generational congregation.

¹ Erland Waltner and J. Daryl Charles, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: 1-2 Peter, Jude* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 1999), 75.

So as we enter the final stages of our church renovation project, I invite you to remember that we ultimately want to remain an “unfinished” church. Even after everything has been repainted and spruced up and put back into its rightful place, we are still living stones built on God the Rock and Christ the Cornerstone. The Spirit-led work of the church is by definition ongoing, stretching into God’s future in enlivening, life-preserving, and life-giving ways. That’s why I, for one, am grateful that we are – and will continue to be – an “unfinished” church. AMEN