

Sermon "Blessings and Challenges"
Sunday, May 14, 2017
Scripture: I Peter 2:1-10, John 14:1-6a
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Our first scripture reading I Peter 2:1-10 is a baptismal sermon. In this passage the author compares the new life in Christ to the birth and growth of an infant. He goes on to use the metaphor of living stones, emphasizing our connectedness as a family of God and the strength of our foundation which is Christ Jesus, the cornerstone. God's people are exhorted to the challenges which go hand in hand with the blessings of a new identity. Hear now the word of God.

1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 Come to Christ, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. 6 For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in Christ will not be put to shame." 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," 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. 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 Christ who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 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. Amen.

Our second reading is John 14:1-6a. This particular passage is a part of the Farewell Discourse, which is unique to John's gospel. Christ's concern is not so much on what will befall him. Rather, he is concerned about what will happen to the disciples who have become like children when the inevitable crisis of his absence occurs in his pending death. The first promise is the assurance of an abiding place with God. "In my father's house are many dwelling places." Jesus came into the world experiencing the painful reality of limited resources. When his mother was ready to give birth, there was no place at the inn. Jesus leaves this world with the assurance that it is not so with his Father's house, for heaven is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all. Hear now God's holy word.

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one come to the father except through me. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Blessings and Challenges

The text: Once you were no people but now you are God's people. 1 Peter 2:10a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, who bends down to lift infants and whose understanding is unsearchable, thank you for the blessings and challenges on the journey to become your people. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child quieted at his mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and
forevermore.” (RSV)*

This prayer of lament and hope found in Psalm 131 was especially comforting to me during a faith crisis in my life. It was towards the end of my second year of seminary in Pasadena, California and I was coming to terms with a loss, a disappointment and accepting the reality of facial paralysis. It's not uncommon when one is sad and feeling overwhelmed to be unable to believe in a loving, life-giving God who cares for us.

At a time when I felt alone and abandoned, the only comfort I found in scripture was in the psalms, particularly the psalms of lament. On the day I came across this psalm I knew that I would be o.k. because whoever wrote this prayer thousands of years before I lived put into words for me what I could not articulate myself.

*But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a child quieted at her mother's breast.
Like a child that is quieted is my soul.*

And when I read these words one thousand miles away from home I imagined my mother's arms around me, holding me, quieting me, comforting me, not with words, but with herself... with her irreplaceable presence. And somehow in that touch, in the memory of the reassuring presence of my mother that was so familiar to me, I experienced God's love anew and felt for the first time in a very long time that it was well with my soul.

The profound influence of a mother in the child's 'becoming' is affirmed throughout Scripture. The author of First Peter compares the Christian life to a new born baby longing for a mother's milk. The psalmist likens the comfort of God's presence to a child quieted at a mother's breast. The prophet Hosea affirms the God who bends down to lift infants and who teaches Ephraim to walk. First Peter borrows Hosea's metaphor to articulate the new identity in those who follow Christ. "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people."

How profoundly true it is that those who raise us, who nurture us and who teach us to walk shape the people we become. Where would we be without those who were there for us on our journeys to comfort, to encourage, to set limits, and to refine our character that we might become God's own people, connected and grounded in the living cornerstone.

In the influence we have on our children's lives, may we build a strong foundation with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. As Christ has taught and modeled for us we must be frank and honest with our children about life and faith, so they come to understand, as we have learned, that there is no privilege without responsibility and there are no blessings without challenges. If one chooses to live a faithful life, expect both glory and pain. Even as Jesus never did, we cannot promise a life without loss and disappointment or we will do a tremendous disservice to the children with whom we have been entrusted.

Jesus' leaving and letting go makes possible a new dimension of God's presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Jesus leaves this world with the assurance that there is room for all in the next. Jesus' leaving and letting go also affirms that we have a God who understands the necessary losses that are a part of each of our lives.

In her book *Necessary Losses*, Judith Viorst proposes that loss is universal and unavoidable. *We lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. Our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but also our illusions and expectations about them and ourselves.* Viorst contends that it is through our losing, leaving and letting go that we become the persons God intends, God's own people.

Three years ago I preached my first Mother's Day sermon at Westminster and quoted one of the candidates under consideration by the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee. Serendipitously, it was Hannah Dreitcer's reflection on her first night on-call as a hospital chaplain. She wrote these words following a night of ministering to those who were losing, leaving and letting go:

Sometime just before dawn, I realized that we were in a holy space, creating it together, held by God. More than that, I had been held in holy time all night long, from the moment of that first call.

Today we gather on Mother's Day to celebrate the holy space we have created together, with Hannah since she accepted her first call to serve Westminster. We are grateful for the journey we have shared, held in holy time by God. We are grateful for all the ways Hannah has nurtured the faith of our children, and for the encouragement she has given (not only our youth but each one of us) to keep our eyes and ears open for the unexpected presence of Christ on our roads to Emmaus. And we are grateful for Hannah's mother, who served faithfully as a Presbyterian pastor, whom Hannah lost at too early an age, and whose legacy Hannah honors with her own ministry.

And so it is with affection and joy that we let the Reverend Hannah Dreitcer go and embrace this necessary loss, thankful for the blessings and challenges before each of us as we go our separate ways and mindful of the bond that connects us as God's own people no matter where we are. Called as partners in Christ's service, we will forever belong to one another and to the God who calls us to ministries of grace.

I have calmed and quieted my soul... Thanks be to God. Amen.