

Sermon "A Home in God"

Sunday, May 7, 2023

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 nourishment 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 responsibilities which go hand in hand with the 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, Christ 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 passage is 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, Christ 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. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: A Home in God

*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, thank you for the home we have found in you through your son, our Lord and Savior. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Yesterday was a meaningful day for me as your pastor. In the morning I shared in the intimacy of a graveside service with the family of one of Westminster's children. It is always a privilege to speak these words before the committal: We bring our loved one home confident that life does not end with death, that our Creator will care for us beyond the understanding, for we believe that if the earthly tent in which we live is no longer, we have a home in God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

In the afternoon I officiated at the wedding of the daughter of one of Westminster's family members. It is always a joy to be a part of tying the knot for a couple who have found a home in one another.

This afternoon our church family will be enriched by the music of gifted siblings in a concert to benefit the home we are helping to build for a family in the community.

Today's scripture readings affirm and celebrate the home we have in God. The author of Peter, in a baptismal sermon, compares coming into our own as believers to a newborn longing for nourishment and living stones built into a spiritual home. He borrows the prophet Hosea's metaphor to convey the new identity for those of us who follow Christ. "Once we were no people, but now we are God's people."

In Christ's farewell discourse, recorded in John's gospel, Jesus leaves this world assuring his followers that the painful reality of limited resources he experienced at the time of his birth when there was no room at the inn is not so in his Father's house. Heaven is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all.

The church, as God's people, is called to be a unified community that opens its home in a risky hospitality. These scripture readings recognize the individual Christian; however, the emphasis is on the community, the family, and the home to which we belong.

John Westerhoff, III in his book *Living the Faith Community* presents a thoughtful analysis of American society. One of the concerns raised by sociologists is competitiveness and over emphasis on the individual at the expense of community life. We live in a society that has lost the delicate balance between individual and community. The foundation of this country, the rights and respect for the individual exemplified in our Bill of Rights, ironically, if taken to an extreme, can undermine the strength of community.

The tragic mass killings in our country on a weekly, even daily basis, give us reason to pause and wonder whether we are erring so much on the side of protecting individual rights that we are failing as a community. The right to bear arms was originally established to defend the community of our colonies in the eighteenth century. Sadly, this right has grown into an individual right with few restrictions, restrictions that would be logical and necessary to protect the community from violent and dangerous individuals, lacking self-control, with or without

mental illness. Privacy rights intended to protect the individual, regrettably work against the community's charge to protect and care for one another.

According to Westerhoff: *The essential nature of religious community is hard to grasp here on a continent where television evangelists typically strive to win souls for Christ, but rarely for Christ's church, where baptism is understood as a call to individual salvation, rather than an incorporation into a family, and where the church is believed to be a voluntary association to which we individually belong by choice and withdraw at will, rather than the eternal relationship established by God, binding us together to be a sign and witness of God's reign in human history.*

Because baptism is our initiation into the community of faith, it is a celebration at the heart of our life together. The nurture we provide children in their faith formation includes the delicate balance of celebrating them as individuals with diverse gifts and reminding them that God has given these gifts for the common good of the community.

I close with a story shared by Vincent Donovan, a priest, author and missionary who rediscovers that delicate balance as he prepared a community in African village for baptism following a year of evangelization. He proceeded to sort out for the community leader those who rarely attended church, those who didn't understand the faith, and those whose lives had shown no noticeable change because of it.

*Padri Donovan, the older gentleman stopped politely but firmly, "Why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During the year you visited us, we have talked around the fire after you departed. Of course, there have been the idle ones, but they have been helped by those with much energy. There have been those who do not understand but they have been helped by those who do. There have been ones of little faith, but they have been helped by those with much faith. From the first day you came, I have spoken for these people, and I speak for them now. We have reached the place where we can say "We believe."*

*We believe; communal faith!* pondered Father Donovan. Then he recalled the old rite for infant baptism: What do you ask the church? Of course, the infant could not answer but the infant's parents would supply the response.

*"Faith!"* Donovan reflects, *"We come to the church not because we have faith but because we desire faith and know that it can only be ours if we live in a community of faith."* Father Donovan looked at the old man, *Excuse me, sometimes my head is hard and learns slowly. We believe, you said; of course, you do. Everyone in the community will be baptized.*

We have a home in God. *Once we were no people but now we are God's people. We belong to each other through the One who has the power to transform lives and communities of faith! So be it. Amen.*