

How to Be a Living Stone

May 10, 2020

1 Peter 2:2-10

If I asked you all “Who are you,” what would your first response be? Naturally, our first response to this question would be to give our name, for sure our first name and possibly our last name. However, “Who you are,” the basic question of one’s identity, is not exclusive to our name. This question is inclusive of other identity markers such as likes/dislikes, demographics, ideologies, and life experiences, just to name a few. The ways we identify ourselves help us to feel like we are part of something greater, like we are individual members of a greater collection, much as we all identify as individual members of the Body of Christ. However, identifying with one group or another doesn’t seem like a good thing in some cases.

As humans, both now and throughout history, we have proven to be very good at casting judgment towards others, designating “those people” as “other,” as better or worse than we are for whatever reason. In Third Reich Germany, Jews, homosexuals, and Germans who didn’t support the Nazi party were deemed “other” and sent into the concentration camps. During the Colonial and Antebellum periods of our great nation, African Americans were labeled “other,” as “lesser” and therefore deserving of enslavement. During the Protestant Reformation, any Christian who didn’t conform to the Catholic Church, who followed the lead of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were ostracized and even persecuted. In parts of our world today, Christians and other religious groups are *still* persecuted. This same situation is what sparked today’s Scripture reading.

In the reading for today, Peter is writing to his fellow Christians who, at that point in time, were being persecuted for their being followers of Jesus. As a result of their being persecuted, we can imagine that they felt like God had abandoned them, a thought that can have very isolating repercussions. In all truth, they probably wanted to lash out at those who persecuted them, to “avenge their fallen brethren” as it were. All three of these points, Peter tackles in this short passage.

The first of these points Peter tackles is that of “isolation.” In the reading, he refers to Jesus as “the stone which the leaders rejected,” a reference to the prophets in the Old Testament and a phrase that the persecuted could relate to on a certain level. However, this rejected stone, this “living stone”, Peter points out that it is precious and loved by God. In fact, it has been made the “chief cornerstone” of God’s House. In other words, though Jesus was rejected by the religious elite and those the elite got to go along with them, God did not reject Jesus. So too is this the case with Christ’s followers, referred to then as “living stones” as well. Just as they might be rejected by humanity, God does not reject them. Rather, God connects them, makes them “living stones,” therein giving them purpose as members of God’s House. We find here a reassurance that not only are we not the only ones who might feel this way (there are others going through what we’re experiencing) but that God knows what we are enduring. Jesus, the Son, the Word made flesh, endured this same persecution, and we therein rest assured that God knows and cares for us in these times of trial just as God cared for Jesus. In short, therefore, this identity of being “Christian” is not a matter of “Who am I?” but “Who are we?” Peter is making

it very clear that to identify as “Christian” is to identify communally, not individually. This however is not all that Peter has to say about being “living stones.”

The second major point Peter is driving at is that of “vindication.” The reading tells us that the stone the leaders rejected (i.e. Jesus) is the same one that causes them to stumble and fall, again, a reference to the Prophets. The point Peter is driving at here is that those of this world who reject others will in turn fail. God sees each and every one of us as precious, as serving a purpose in the Kingdom of God, and while we might feel rejected here, on Earth, God does not reject us. The powers of this world hold no power over God, and the mercy God shows us is better than any acceptance we might find from the powers that be in this world. Remember for a moment the moral of Jesus’ “Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector”: “those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Put another way, those that put others down will themselves fall, and those that are put down, they will be lifted up. However, once we have been lifted up, once we’re feeling valued and useful, once we feel like we are a part of something greater and we have been vindicated, we must resist the urge to bring low those who brought us low, to seek revenge. This is the final point Peter is driving at here.

The final point that Peter is making here is that of mercy. Those that were being persecuted, the original audience of this epistle, were marginalized, were pushed to the side and not shown mercy by their fellow humans. However, God showed them mercy. Therefore, as members of this same faith, as “precious stones” of the modern day, as members of the holy priesthood and as Children of God, we are called to show mercy and to lift up the marginalized rather than “oppress the oppressors.” The Connections commentary series brings up the issue of incarceration as a great example of this, saying:

“The American prison system is not predicated on the idea of mercy or leniency.

Political platforms, in fact, often present the idea that what our nation needs is *tougher* laws, *longer* mandatory sentences, and *reduced* parole . . . Certainly, there is ample opportunity in the United States today for the church to lift up its voice in both political and social witness to the power of grace for the incarcerated in our midst.”

In other words, as the marginalized, as those who have been put down, our response is not to seek revenge once we are lifted up but rather to lift others up. Just as we have been shown mercy, we are called as Christians to show mercy as well.

All of us here identify as Christians, both on the individual and communal levels. We identify as individual followers of Jesus Christ who, together, are the “living stones” that make up God’s House. As followers of Christ, we are, as Peter writes, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” These are very distinguished titles, ones that hold great stature and glory, but with such distinction comes a tall order of “showing mercy, even in the face of not having been shown it.” While we ourselves do not face persecution like the original audience did, persecution is still happening to Christians around the world. While we might live comfortably away from the margins in our church, many are still being pushed to the

margins every day. The impoverished, the hungry, the incarcerated and paroled, these are but a few examples of the many today who are still pushed to the margins and deemed as “other.” As Christians then, we must consider what we can do to lift up those that have been pushed aside, to show mercy to those who as of yet have not been shown mercy. As the Children of God, as “living stones,” we are the means by which God’s mercy is shown in this world. So, I invite you to ask yourselves, “How is God calling me to be a ‘living stone’ at this moment?”