

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 28:16  
SECOND LESSON: 1 Peter 2:2-10  
May 3, 2020

***“Do We Know Who We Are?”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

There’s a lot of famous stones in the world. There’s the Rosetta stone to decode language. There’s the Blarney stone to use that language to spout a lot of nonsense. There’s Plymouth Rock and Stonehenge. There’s the actress Emma Stone. There’s even Merv Griffin’s tombstone which says, “I will not be right back after this message.” But I never thought of myself as a stone, living or otherwise. While it does give a whole new meaning to, “You rock!” living stones is a strange metaphor. But Peter says not only are we living stones, Jesus is the cornerstone.

A cornerstone sets the pattern for the whole building. It has to be perfectly square. Take a corner stone and build two walls off of it. If it’s going to work it has to be possible to build two more walls and close off the square. You can imagine the distorted shape of the building if it’s off even by a few inches. Those with tools shape cornerstones so they are perfect. But if you happen to be a poor Palestinian peasant in the 1<sup>st</sup> century you look hard for one that is close to perfect to begin with, rejecting a lot on the way.

Jesus was the cornerstone that was rejected not because he was defective, but because those in charge did not want that kind of building. But Peter applied the words of Isaiah to Jesus saying that Jesus is “a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

We might not use the phrase “put to shame,” but we certainly have the underlying concept and experience. Honor and shame are basic elements of social control. In a close-knit community public reputation is everything. It defines identity and self-worth. I grew up with my mother literally telling me, “What will the neighbors think?” In the 1<sup>st</sup> century it was “what will the neighbors think” on steroids. An honorable woman was virtuous and industrious. An honorable man had standing in society and the respect of others if he was a good provider and a leader in his community. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century for both genders having lots of sons increased status and being childless or having all daughters decreased it.

Having low social status and being rejected by others can make life excruciating. Being publicly shamed is the worst kind of humiliation possible, as any teenage victim of online bullying will tell you. People commit suicide because they are publicly shamed. Monica Lewinsky was held up to such public shaming that she had to move to England to escape. She described her experience as an “avalanche of pain and humiliation.” Peter promised that

those who belong to Christ will not be shamed and humiliated, probably because that is exactly what was happening. Ancient graffiti mocking Christians has been found. Christians were being rejected by their friends and families. Christians then and Christians now do at times experience opposition and persecution. Ultimately, however, Peter says that those who believe in Jesus will be vindicated.

Peter laid it out for us. Jesus is the cornerstone, a cornerstone often rejected by society. The standards he sets for us are high, and the priorities he has for us are often different from the priorities of those around us. We are like living stones, joined together to form a whole. But just when we're beginning to get the rock thing down, he then starts to merge images. He says that we are "like living stones" "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood." And not only a holy priesthood, but we are also "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession." This is a lot! And it's a lot that is quite foreign to us and our daily life.

All of these words and images are deeply rooted in Judaism. The priests serving in the temple were mediators between God and the people. But while one nation within Israel was set apart to serve as priests, God also said to the people through Moses, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6) This is a promise that was reserved for the Jewish nation. It is a promise that Peter says has now been extended to Gentile believers.

What, in this context, does a "priest" do? A priest is a mediator between God and the people, therefore to be a priest in this way is to reveal God by how we live. It is to witness with our actions and words to God's glory and mercy. People can't see God. They can SEE us. And just in case we think the term "royal" gives us special status and expect to be waited on, we have to remember that we are royal because Jesus is our king. He is our role model. But knowing who we are can make all the difference in how we live our lives.

When she was fifteen years old Melba Patillo Beals was chosen to be one of the Little Rock Nine, nine students chosen to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. We only saw on the news the terrifying ordeal they went through entering and leaving the building every day. But there were no guards to protect Melba once she was in the school from the taunts, threats and bullying of the white students. No one was there when she was shoved, spit on and called names. No one was there when she was trapped in the girl's room while they held the stall door shut and threw pieces of burning paper on top of her. But Melba had been raised with an incredibly strong faith. She had been raised **to know** that she was God's warrior. Her grandmother reminded her daily that she was one with God and of infinite value, and that breaking down the barriers at Little Rock was God's assignment.

Melba made it through the year before the governor closed all the schools in Arkansas to prevent integration. At that point the Ku Klux Klan had a price on her head--\$10,000 dead, \$5000 alive. She was 16 going on 17-years-old. She and the other students were smuggled out of state to safety. Melba ended up in Santa Rosa, California, taken in by a white family who protected her and

became a second set of parents. She graduated from an integrated high school there and went on to college. Eventually she became a journalist, because of the work she saw journalists do to get the word out when she was in Little Rock.

Melba's life has not been easy. Even those among the African American community were at times critical of what she had done because of the pressure white supremacists were putting on them. *"Why do you want to go where you are not wanted?"* they asked. What gave her the strength to endure was her identity. She knows who she is. She knows she is a child of God. She knows she is equal to anyone. She had the strength to survive and prevail because she knows who she is and whose she is. And when Melba Patillo Beals went back to a reunion in 1987 and once more walked up those forbidding front steps with all of their traumatic memories she was greeted at the top by a slender young African American boy wearing glasses. He bowed and said, "Welcome to Central High School. I am the president of the student body."

Do we know who we are? We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" . . . called out of darkness into light. . . Once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God. Identity is powerful. Identity is everything. We can't be shamed if we know who we are. We belong to God. We have a mission from God. It does not mean that our lives will be easy. But it does mean that they will be life giving to others. In God's hands we are living stones, joined together to take God's message and bring God's transformation to the world. Amen.

Isaiah 28:16

16 So this is what the Sovereign Lord says:  
"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,  
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;  
the one who relies on it  
will never be stricken with panic.

1 Peter 2:2-10

2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.  
4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says:  
"See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame."  
7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

**8** and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

**9** But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.