

FIRST LESSON: 1 Chronicles 29: 15-19
SECOND LESSON: 1 Peter 1:17-23
April 26, 2020

“Building What Lasts”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

If there’s one thing we’ve learned from the present crisis it’s that the church is not the building. The church is the living, breathing community. As we live through this I hope that is one of the things we take with us going forward. Worship can take place anywhere—even in our kitchens.

People have always tried to build something eternal out of the physical. In our Old Testament reading David expresses his hopes for the building of a Temple for the Lord—a temple that will be built by his son Solomon. Despite knowing full well the transitory nature of life David still asks God to “give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided.”

The Temple of Solomon was built in the mid 10th century BCE. It was destroyed about 500 years later in 587 BCE. In 516 BCE the returning exiles began work on a more modest temple, which was later greatly enhanced by Herod. But that temple too was destroyed, this time by the Romans. It existed for about the same amount of time, somewhere between 500 and 600 years. Americans think this is a very long time. Europeans, Asians and Middle Easterners do not. But regardless of antiquity, war can completely destroy even that which has stood for thousands of years. The problem with buildings is that they can be demolished. Everything we build can be unbuilt. This makes putting our faith in things is a precarious exercise.

The letter of I Peter was written from a Jewish perspective to a Gentile audience. The Greek is good, not excellent, but good. It is at least possible that the author truly was the apostle Peter written late in his life with the help of a scribe. In a largely illiterate world people often relied on scribes to write letters for them which they dictated. Some of Paul’s letters were written in this way. Even today a lot of correspondence is dictated and then written up by someone else.

When a religion is ancient, we revere it. People are forever seeking wisdom from “ancient mysteries.” When something is new, we suspect it. A new thing has no track record. A new religion is definitely not to be trusted. But that is what Christianity was in the 1st century. The Gentiles who converted to Christianity were under a lot of pressure to return to their ancient family religion and traditions, what Peter calls “the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors.” Peter asserts that Christianity did not emerge out of nowhere. It is the most ancient of faiths, having begun before the creation of the world. Christ had been revealed in their generation, but he was chosen before the creation of the world. But despite his asserting this spiritual truth, the alienation Christians experienced in the world was very real. Peter even

referred to Christians as “resident aliens” or *paraoikos*—which literally means, “beside the house,” combining two Greek words—*para* (near) and *oikos* (dwelling). It means someone who is just passing through a place who doesn’t have the rights and privileges of citizenship. We are foreigners in our own land, undocumented immigrants living an alternate lifestyle parallel to the mainstream.

Most people in North America today do not experience the clear-cut religious differences these early Christians did. In fact, in some parts of the country, church membership is still assumed. If you’re not a member of a Southern Baptist congregation in South Carolina or Tennessee something must be wrong with you! We forget that in the increasingly secular northeast corridor where we live. But putting all the changes between the ancient world and 21st century America aside, the conflict is still there. The problem now is that many of those with a “look out for number one” materialistic approach to life can be found in ALL religious groups and none.

About 30 years ago I was in a social situation where a man was asked to describe his work as an insurance adjuster. “The first thing you do,” he said, “is nothing.” You don’t respond to their application for at least six months. You wear them down. Then after six months, you offer them a fraction of what they are due.” He went on to describe a process by which he deliberately frustrated and strung along the person with the claim to the point that they were willing to accept anything. After 18 months to two years they would be paid considerably less than they had a right to. And he described this whole shameful process proudly. What is even worse is that this man was an active member of a local church. Somehow there was no connection between what he heard on Sunday morning and the rest of his life.

We are called to live differently—to be set apart. People should be able to recognize that we are Christians by how we live. Peter says we have been redeemed, a word that refers to being bought out of slavery or freed as a prisoner of war. The payment for our redemption was not silver or gold. Our redemption has been paid for through Christ’s blood. We have been freed from a life of futility and darkness. We don’t belong to the world anymore. We don’t even belong to ourselves. We belong to God. Our calling now is to build the kingdom of God.

The nation has stopped. People want to get back what they have lost. There is pressure mounting to just re-open everything—to return to business as usual. But should we ever return to business as usual? I don’t believe God inflicted the coronavirus on us, but human foolishness prevented us from being properly prepared. Our calling as Christ’s followers is always to shine a light in the darkness. We will never succeed in bringing heaven to earth. Only God can do that. But all great reform movements have been accomplished by people of faith.

We are faced with a choice. We can try to rebuild what we had, or we can strive to build what has a chance of lasting—a more just and responsible society. We can invest in things, or invest in people. We’ve seen the economic disparity in our nation. Do we take action to correct it, or not? We’ve seen the disproportionate impact this disease has had on African Americans. Do we work to change the living conditions in our inner cities, or not? We’ve seen the affect we have on this planet. Do we go back to polluting on a massive scale, or

make changes? We've also seen people try to reach out and do loving and helpful things for complete strangers. Will we continue to do this, or forget all about it when the crisis has passed?

Peter says that love, true and deep love, is what sets us apart. Our love is two-fold. It is "philadelphian," which is very interesting considering where we live, and it is agape. Philadelphian love is the love of best friends, the love between brothers and sisters. Agape love is the pure beneficent form of love that does what is best for the other, regardless of emotion. Both are needed now more than ever.

So many things in life are perishable, and we pour a lot of time and effort into building things that will not last. All of the kingdoms of this world will pass away, even our own, but the kingdom of God will not. Amen.

1 Chronicles 29: 15-19

15 We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. **16** Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. **17** I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. **18** Lord, the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. **19** And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided."

1 Peter 1:17-23

17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. **18** For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, **19** but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. **20** He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. **21** Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. **22** Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. **23** For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.