

Cultivating Community

Foundations: Our Identity Together

I Peter 2:4-11

Pastor Dale Evans: June 11, 2017 (am)

Introduction:

A mysterious visitor challenges a young adult refugee about the situation back home. He seems to know many details about the young man's background and has hinted that his understanding of the past may be faulty. He runs into the surrounding brush indicating that he has something worthwhile to see that will change this man's opinion regarding these circumstances. They arrive at a small pond and in the moonlight of the clear night sky he shows him his reflection in the pool. While they debate the significance of his identity, the water stirs and the image that is visible is now the image of his deceased father. The image speaks with the booming bass voice of James Earl Jones with the challenge "remember who you are!"

When we open our Bibles to the first epistle from the apostle Peter we are confronted with a similar situation. In First Peter, Jesus' life, death and resurrection is both the object of the believers' faith and the pattern for living. For Peter, his identity in Christ brought great hope and joy as well as grief and trial. We too must radically re-think how we view ourselves by "recognizing the sweeping scope of new life in Christ and the implications for how to ourselves now that we have been born again...no longer thinking of our relationships to family and society as we did before...but now as we understand who we are before God can we be who we are to be in society." In reading I Peter we find a challenge to transform our thinking about who we are in Christ and its implications for relationship with other believers as a community immersed in a culture that is hostile to the Gospel. Our lives, even to the point of suffering should be distinct because of the power of the Gospel.

First Peter presents the Christian community as "a colony in a strange land, an island of one culture in the midst of another. The new birth that gives Christians a new identity and a new citizenship in the kingdom of God makes us, in whatever culture we happen to live, visiting foreigners and resident aliens there."

For the summer here at Clearcreek Chapel, we will explore through various New Testament texts, the various elements that define, describe and drive the New Testament idea of church and community and apply it to meaning, ministry and mission. We will examine our identity, unity and oneness in the Faith. We will be challenged in our views on our gathering and maturing, on our teaching and fellowship. We will see how the Scriptures should shape our leading and serving in our feeble attempts at serving one another and in the spread of the power of the Gospel.

So after his opening greeting and doxology which sets the tone and introduces the main themes and challenges of the letter, Peter in verse thirteen begins his main exposition with a series of imperatival statements that are addressed in the plural (you-all). He addresses them in context of “them as a group” in relationship to those within and those without. They indeed are a single community of a larger composite of other believers, but the particulars of life are expressed within the context of an identifiable, localized community otherwise know as a church in the New Testament. So let us look closer at our identity and turn to I Peter and we will begin to set context in 1:13.

*Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, **set your hope** fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, **do not be** conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, **you also be holy** in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, **conduct yourselves with fear** throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*

²² *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, **love one** another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;*
²⁴ *for*

“All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass.

²⁵ *The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.”*

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.
² *So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

Indeed there is supplemental information that elaborates and modifies the imperatival statements but the core of most of the sentences are “ought” thoughts. There are statements about the work of God in Christ and the nature of our hope and the source of our faith. And there are some hints as to the nature of who we then are in work of these imperatives.

But the tone of I Peter shifts at vs 4 of chapter 2. The passage of the morning assumes the imperatives above and now more fully gives the reasons we can confidently approach this kind of living. It gives assurance and ability to accomplish the challenge. But as we have said before, Peter is not addressing his audience as individuals but as members of the group.

Shameless Stones (vs 4-8)

Peter first presents us as shameless stones. Let us read verses 4 and 5.

Confident Comparison (vs 4,5)

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In this shift of emphasis, Peter makes a confident comparison by confronting us with a complex sentence that is elaborated with several Old Testament quotations. The core of the sentence is “you are being built up”. It begins by connecting this idea to the previous imperatives, “as you come to him.” In order to accomplish those challenges, we must align ourselves with the idea we are able and “worthy” to fill this task. We are first given the connection that our hope, growth and conduct are connected to a “chosen and precious stone” that has also been rejected. We are then told we are like this stone, indeed are living stones as well. Then the various modifiers to the main sentence that grab on to the stone and building metaphor describe how we are being built, what is the pattern or blueprint for the work, and why we are “in this building project anyway.” We are stones like him. Maybe not “cornerstones” but stones none the less. All of us are pieces

Comprehensive Confirmation (vs 6-8)

He then provides a comprehensive confirmation to this concept by demonstrating from the Old Testament Scriptures that this idea is the intention and how God has worked from the beginning. The OT stone references are interesting and I would love to read them in their entire context. I would challenge you to later (maybe this afternoon) to read them and then read through I Peter and see their application in the whole of the text. He first uses Isaiah 28 to establish the premise, followed by references to the 118th Psalm and then Isaiah 8.

Isaiah 28: 5-6, 14-16

*In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory,
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people,
and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.*

*Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers,
who rule this people in Jerusalem!
Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death,
and with Sheol we have an agreement,
when the overwhelming whip passes through
it will not come to us,
for we have made lies our refuge,
and in falsehood we have taken shelter";
therefore thus says the Lord God,
"Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation
in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone,
of a sure foundation:
'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'*

Psalm 118: 6-9, 17-24

*The Lord is on my side; I will not fear.
What can man do to me?
The Lord is on my side as my helper;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in man.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes.*

*I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the Lord.
The Lord has disciplined me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

Isaiah 8:11-15

¹¹ *For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying:* ¹² *"Do not call*

conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. ¹³ But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. ¹⁴ And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁵ And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”

Then turn back to Peter 2:6-8 and we read:

⁶ *For it stands in Scripture:*

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷ *So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”*

⁸ *and*

“A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

Think of small, walled cities where the walls are there for protection. They define and defend those who live inside. The gate however is the weak point of the wall. It is the way in and the way out. A city is only as strong and is only as protected as its gate. The strength and structure of the gate defines the power and extent of protection and is built with specific pieces to provide such stability. God has built the gate with a stone that has properties not understood or recognized by mere human builders. It is a stone that creates a fulcrum of trust by its very presence. Those who believe are secure, those who doubt will fall. But not only does Peter identify Jesus as the cornerstone from those Old Testament references, he states that we are also components of the structure with the metaphor shifting to a “spiritual house.” Indeed Peter wants his readers to understand that the situation they are in and the challenges they face does not contradict but is enhanced by their nature as shameless stones or in honor because of belief.

Particular Populace (vs 9-10)

And then Peter uses Isaiah 43, Exodus 19 and Hosea 2 to describe the kind of people they are. They are not just randomly in their circumstances they are a particular populace. By choosing passages that involve the first exodus from Egypt and the second “exodus” from the Babylonian exile, Peter is continuing to provide his audience with the exile-deliverance motif that he began in the opening. Their deliverance was just as intentional and supernatural as their spiritual forefathers’. Again I would really love to read the quotations in their

complete context and let me challenge you to do so later. First we see from Isaiah 43

Isaiah 43:1,19-21

*But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
²⁰ The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.*

Exodus 19:5-6

*⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant,
you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples,
for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a
kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that
you shall speak to the people of Israel.”*

Hosea 2:16,23

*“And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no
longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’
And I will have mercy on No Mercy,
and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people’;
and he shall say, ‘You are my God.’ ”*

Broadcasting Band (vs 9)

In turning to verse 9 we see Peter inserting the comments from Exodus into the remarks from Isaiah.

*⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people
for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him
who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

God’s deliverance creates a new and radical change in identity. It forms a new relationship with Himself and a new relationship with the members of this new community. We are indeed a chosen race, and group of people specifically chosen to a new identity and purpose. As a new people we have a royal status that has access to God himself (the ideas behind royal priesthood) and as a band of peoples are indeed called not only to a unique and special position (his own

possession) but one that is ethically distinct from the corruption of the world (holy nation). And this new identity enables a faithful proclamation of his glories and praises in deed we are to be a broadcasting band of brothers and sisters, a new race, nation and priesthood.

Graced Gathering (vs 10)

And in verse 10, Peter reminds us that this standing is indeed because of grace.

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.

God himself has bestowed mercy and position upon rebels and failures. As God is gathering His people, He does so by His own gracious designs. We are “dead-made-alive” stones, a “lost-now-found” people-group, a “stained-now-clean” nation all because of His designs, actions and mercy.

Reflect and Respond

So our take home message is something like this: live out who we are. But we are to remember that it is a “we” who are. This is the initial sermon for the summer to show the Biblical focus on the people of God as one, united, serving community in the world but not of the world. This foundational challenge reminds us that God is at work in building community and the very nature of who we are is designed to show the integrated nature of the church and community. While community is a ministry of our church it is essential to being a church. We are to view our ministry and implementation of community in this church as something God is intentionally creating and empowering. To think otherwise is to functionally view this as simply a religious club whose purpose and practice is at the whim of the leadership.

Look around you. Do you think of these people as God's people with you? Do you understand them as essential building blocks (living stones) of God's work in your life? Do you see them as kings and priests on your behalf? Do you hear their praises and encouragement as a challenge for you to join in to proclaim his excellencies? Do you share in the delivery of God's mercy to each in our giving of ourselves for one another?

This is the foundation of Biblical community. This is the true nature of being a church. This is the essential character of life in this time of redemptive history. This is what God has called us to be and has transformed us to enable this action. Remember who you are!