

8th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

1 Peter 2:1-10

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,

a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the very head of the corner';

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.

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 him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

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.

Today is the second week that we are spending with the Book of First Peter, a book that we have yet to spend a lot of time with during the past two years as your pastor. (As it turns out, this week marks the two year anniversary of the first Sunday I preached here after moving to Shelter Island). This book, or, more accurately this *letter*, is traditionally thought to have been written by the Apostle Peter, however, more recent scholarship suggests that it was probably written by one of Peter's followers. This letter was written to a group of Christian communities scattered throughout Asia Minor. The context of First Peter is that of a group of Christians living amongst social and political tensions. Perhaps with that piece of information, we might find a certain kinship with the people to whom this letter was originally addressed.

Christianity continued to grow into a worldwide movement but, at this point, it was not in the good graces of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire's endorsement of Christianity wouldn't come for several hundreds of years, during the fourth century. The Romans had a very hierarchical social structure.¹ The powerful had their place and the powerless were expected to stay in their place. Therefore, the Romans found the Christian movement, with its focus on empowering and protecting the powerless and marginalized, very threatening.

¹ Balch, David L. in the introduction to the Letter of First Peter in Harper Collins Study Bible (p. 2059).

In the face of public slander and persecution, the author of First Peter urges the Christian communities to imitate Christ by loving one another and not returning violence with violence. Essentially, the purpose of today's passage is to remind the community who they are in order to continue to "fight the good fight" and "run the race of faith," as the Apostle Paul would put it.

Being reminded of who we are as a Christian community is one of the most important things that we practice together week in and week out. Why is it so important that we do this? Well, I would suggest that the biblical narrative gives us many examples of bad things that happen when we forget who we are as God's people. A quick stroll through the Bible will remind us of such cases...

Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit in the garden because they forgot that they belonged to God and not to the manipulative rhetoric of that slippery serpent.

The people in the Book of Genesis began to build the Tower of Babel, desiring to become as "high" and "mighty" as God. They did this because they forgot that they were the "creation" and *not* the "Creator."

In the Book of Exodus, the Israelites grow impatient while Moses is up on the mountain with God for many days and they decide to convince Aaron to let them worship a golden calf in the meantime. This idolatry was the result of them forgetting that they were called to worship God and God alone.

The prophet Isaiah was called to remind the Israelites of their identity as a people called to seek justice and love kindness. They had forgotten that the God they worshiped was the God of the oppressed, the God of the orphan and the widow, the God of the powerless. The Israelites forgot that they, too, were likewise called to be stewards of the oppressed, the orphan, the widow, and the powerless.

In the New Testament, Jesus time and time again challenges the Pharisees who were often self-righteous because of their extreme following of God's laws. However, Jesus reminded them that they often forgot the spirit of the law. He reminded them, and indeed, all of us, that we are called to first and foremost love one another as God first loved us.

Simply put, bad things happen when we forget who we are. Such is the reason, I suppose, that parents remind their children before they leave the house to remember who they are and where they came from. History is important. Our roots are crucial. Our calling is precious. We *must not* forget who we are and who's we are.

The beginning of today's passage from First Peter begins its "identity reminder" by first reminding the people who they are *not* called to be. They are *not* called to be people of malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander. Yesterday, at our third men's breakfast of the summer, we read over this passage and this verse in particular. After we read this first verse, one of our participants invited us to imagine for a moment how different this world would look without those things. How might our daily news feed be altered without the presence of malice or envy or slander? How might the Shelter Island Reporter look differently if there was no guile or insincerity on this island? It's a wonderful thing to imagine, isn't it?

Since we are to reject these harmful emotions that, regretfully, are a rather instinctual part of being human, the author of today's passage urges us to head in a different direction. Rather than gravitate towards these sinful things, we are called to be like newborn infants - that is, we are called to depend on God's "spiritual milk" with the same complete dependance a newborn child has for his or her mother's sustenance. We are to do this, we are told, to grow in salvation as we taste the goodness of the Lord.

The author then continues to remind the people that they are to let themselves be built into a “spiritual house,” and to be a royal priesthood, and to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. Simply put, we are not meant to be a community like any other. We are meant to be a “spiritual house” built upon the foundation of the living stone of Jesus Christ. We are called to be a royal priesthood, people who first and foremost take care of others, especially those that are unable to care for themselves due to oppression, violence, illness, or any other factor. Finally, we are called to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. Within the context of today’s passage, I believe that these spiritual sacrifices are the practices of putting on the clothing of Christ and partaking in holy, Godly practices that take work to live in to. Unfortunately, it takes no real effort to be malicious, or insensitive, or envious - these things come all too naturally. However, living together as the Beloved Community, seeking justice and righteousness and peace takes work - hard work - each and every day. It takes practice. It takes patience. It takes sacrifice, make no mistake about it.

Finally, the author of today’s passage closes with a concrete summary and reminder of who the people are called to be. Verse 9 and 10 say the following:

*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 him
who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
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.*

Friends, we have been chosen as a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. Now that is not to say that we should get on our high horse and walk around with a chip on our shoulders because we are “chosen.” Rather, the intent of this letter is to remind us - to use the old cliché - “with great power comes great responsibility.” Christ has entrusted us as his vehicles of justice and peace in a world that so desperately needs it. We are called to be a holy nation of God’s own people. Not a nation in the political sense but rather on a much larger scale. What is at stake here is so much bigger than the United States of America or any other country, for that matter. What is at stake here is an inclusive community of broken people, radically committed to justice for *all* people, for *all* nations.

We are these things - this chosen race, this royal priesthood, this holy nation, God’s own people - in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of God. We proclaim the mighty acts of the God who calls us - as today’s passage puts it - out of darkness and into God’s marvelous light.

The news this past week seems to have given us much more darkness than light. Yet again we have been witness to horrible violence across this nation. To echo the words of House Speaker Paul Ryan, “This has been a long week for our country. It’s been a long month for America. We have seen terrible, terrible, senseless things.” This week we witnessed with horror the violent deaths of two African American men at the hands of police officers. Unfortunately, such an occurrence seems to have become commonplace - what is unacceptable has become ordinary through our indifference. And as if that weren’t enough violence for one week, we watched in terror as five police officers were killed at the hands of a gunman, leaving more than that wounded. How long, O Lord, we ask, will this continue to happen. How long will we be a nation gripped by senseless violence that seems to have no limit?

Yesterday, as I was finishing up this sermon, I looked to the internet for the latest news. As soon as the page opened, a very appropriate headline was placed front and center at the top of the website in emboldened red letters. It read the following: “WHO CAN MAKE IT STOP?”

I believe that is a question that we have all asked at one time or another in recent months. It's not a new question, really. It's a question that has plagued us for centuries. Who can make it stop?

However, that article bothered me somewhat. Mostly it bothered me because the question - "who can make it stop" - was framed within the context of politics and the upcoming political elections in November. What makes me uncomfortable with that approach is that the truth is *no one person* on earth can, by him or her self, "make this stop." Obama can't. Hillary Clinton wouldn't be able to, as president, and neither would Donald Trump. The question "who can make it stop" is best answered by looking around at each other and our ourselves. *We* can make it stop. You and me, together, as the Beloved Community can make it stop by doing our best to spread the light of love.

I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes from Gandalf the Grey in the Lord of the Rings. Speaking of the terrible and evil wizard Saruman, Gandalf says the following: "Saruman believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay...small acts of kindness and love."

Friends, that is, indeed, the truth. It is with ordinary acts of kindness and love that the darkness is kept in check. While politicians certainly do hold much power - for good or for ill - to change the world, you and I already have a leader who can make it stop. You and I already have a leader in Jesus Christ, who we are called to imitate in today's passage from First Peter. You and I follow Christ, remembering that we are his beloved children, and we are called to love because - as Lin-Manuel Miranda so eloquently put it at the Tony Awards - love is love is love is love is love is love!

There was, however, one remarkably encouraging part to that CNN article, and it was this. Towards the very end, the author of the article quoted the Deputy Chief of the Dallas Police, Malik Aziz, saying the following after the terrible shooting of the Dallas police officers: "Let's be human beings."

That is a crucial reminder to each and every one of us. It is a reminder that I believe is encapsulated in today's passage from First Peter. Terrible things happen when we forget our humanity or otherwise refuse to see one another's humanity. When we forget who we are, humankind's capacity for evil is astonishing. However, when we remember who we are, when we see the precious humanity in one another's eyes, when we remember that we are God's people who have received mercy and are called to share it with others, then, *then*, humankind's capacity for love is even more powerful. Never forget that.

Last week, Elie Wiesel died. He was an author, professor, activist, Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor. The following quote has been shared much in the days since his death and I would like to read it here before we close.

Elie Wiesel once said: The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."

Friends, an indifferent Christian community is a community that has forgotten its identity. May we all remember today's words from First Peter, that we are called to be the Beloved Community that stands for justice and righteousness and mercy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.