

Living Stones
I Peter 2:2-10
May 10, 2020

It has been ten weeks since we last worshipped in our sanctuaries and worship centers. We're adapting to the new reality of online worship, but we miss the intimacy of gathering in person, of shaking a hand, receiving a hug, sharing one another's lives in person. And it appears that it will be weeks, perhaps months, before we worship in person again.

One of the stark reminders of this season is that the church is not a building; the church is a people. The church has left the building, but the ministry of Christ continues for the church is the people of God.

The recipients of the first letter of Peter were in a similar situation in the late first century. Their beloved Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans. The Temple was a sacred place, understood by Jews and early Christians to be the dwelling place of God. The desecration of such a sacred place was traumatic. It left people of faith feeling homeless, rootless, without an anchor. The holy place to which they longed to make pilgrimage was no more. The Temple with its rituals and priests had historically been the place where they found access to God. Without their holy sanctuary, they felt disoriented. Doesn't that sound familiar?

This is why the images of stones are central to this scripture. The original Temple was made of stones, some of them massive. In the midst of their grief, Peter invites these followers of Christ to come home to Jesus, to the Living Stone, the Cornerstone of a new spiritual temple being built by God. In the absence of a physical building, God is constructing a sacred sanctuary made of living stones.

The cornerstone is a large stone near the foundation which binds together two rows of stones and is crucial in holding the whole building together. These people of faith are invited to assemble themselves around the cornerstone of Christ. The Holy Spirit serves as the mortar that binds these living stones together. As disciples of Jesus Christ, the living stones are united to be the living presence of God in the world.

What an honor and responsibility! Through our life together we are to make visible the presence and love of God. As God's holy and royal priesthood, we are called to be like God in character and purpose so that when people see us they say, "There is something different, unique and special about those Christians!" The responsibility of priests is to serve on behalf of others, to know the hurts of the world and communicate them to God, and to make God's love known in the midst of the world's pain.

Each of us is a living stone. We aren't hardened rocks meant to be walked upon or simply to sit in the garden as decoration. God has breathed into us the gift of life. Animated by the Holy Spirit, we are vital characters in the spiritual temple, the living presence of God today. One of the gifts of this difficult time is that we can reclaim the true nature of the church. It is an instrument whereby loving connections are made between God and people and between people with one another. Our world today is hungry for authentic loving connection and community. The epidemic of loneliness in our society is now made more severe. Other health issues including addiction, violence, obesity, anxiety and depression are related to loneliness, to

a lack of genuine caring relationships. God calls followers of Christ to make God's love visible in caring connections.

Former US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, has written a new book called, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. In a recent interview, I heard him say, "There is nothing more powerful than love in terms of its ability to heal. There is nothing I have written a prescription for that eclipses what love can do in the face of extraordinary injury, trauma, and pain. The clearest way we feel love is in the context of relationships, authentic, open relationships."ⁱ

Dr. Murthy suggests that people are primarily driven by one of two emotions: love or fear. Love can manifest as generosity, kindness, empathy. Fear has a lot of manifestations including insecurity, anger, or indifference. We are all subject to these two forces, love and fear. We see both forces at work in powerful ways in this current climate. He asks, "What can we do to tip the world toward love in terms of what drives us?"

As living stones comprising the Body of Christ, as a holy and royal priesthood, we are called to tip the world toward love.

I just heard a true story about an 11-year-old girl named Emerson, Em for short. She has a serious letter-writing habit, hand decorating letters and envelopes. Her father says that she regularly corresponds with a dozen people. A letter from Emerson is likely to include some art, a joke or two, a mention of her younger brother, confessions of her love for Taylor Swift, and enough questions to guarantee a response.

Recently she wrote a thank you letter to her mail carrier for the service he provides, a letter containing the usual: Taylor Swift, her little brother, and jokes.

Q: Why do you never see elephants hiding in trees?

A: Because they're really good at it.

The letter read: "I'm Emerson. You may know me as the person that lives here that writes a lot of letters and decorated the envelopes. Well, I wanted to thank you for taking my letters and delivering them. You are very important to me. I make people happy with my letters, but you do too."

She continued, "The reason you are very important in my life is because I don't have a phone so how else am I supposed to stay in touch with my friends? You make it possible!" She put the letter in the box, smiled when the carrier took it, and was satisfied.

The next day a package arrived with some stamps and two letters. Doug, the mail carrier, had shared Em's letter with his supervisor, Sara. Both wanted to share how touched they were. Sara wrote, "Dear Emerson, Writing letters is an art....Think about the feeling you get when you see a letter addressed to you, with your name on it? Gives you an instant smile, right? That's how the recipients of your letters, including your mailman, felt. You bring joy in so many hearts and I hope you never stop."

Sara, the supervisor, shared Em's letter in an internal newsletter for postal workers. The next week Em's parents received a letter from another postal worker saying that many of them were so touched by her letter that they wanted to send her letters, with their permission. The next week Doug, the mail carrier, came out of his truck with two boxes of letters from around the country. Doug and Em met for the first time. Her father wrote, "It was a beautiful moment of silent reciprocity."

He says, “The letters are so deeply human. They are filled with family, pets, hobbies, community, and an overwhelming sense of kindness. Because Em was vulnerable, they were too. Em shared jokes, so they shared jokes. Em shared her brother, so every gift that was sent came in duplicate. One maintenance manager from Minnesota wanted to inspire her to start collecting stamps so he sent two stamps of his own to start her collection. Many sent stamps for her to write back and to write others.

But there was something more in these letters. People felt seen – some for the first time in a long time. “I work alone in a small rural post office...” “My kids live far away...” “Not a lot of people think about how hard we work...” “I can’t tell you how much it means to read your letter...” “I have a son in Kuwait and if you have a second to send him a letter he would love it.”

With dozens of new pen pals, Em did what she does best. She wrote the dad. She wrote the son. She acknowledged that there were a lot of letters, but that she had time. She sees them all.ⁱⁱ

Doug, the mail carrier, is a mediator carrying letters of love from one person to another. That’s the role of a priest, to mediate the love of God to the people of God and to communicate the heartaches and hopes of the world to God. Em, the letter writer, is a living stone, who sees people and calls them out of darkness into the light of God’s love.

Doug and Em are tipping the world toward love. That’s the work of priests in the household of God: to develop relationships that connect people to the healing presence of God. As living stones comprising the Body of Christ, we tip the world toward love.

Dr. Murthy says, “Creating a connected life begins with the decisions we make in our day to day lives. Do we choose to make time for people? Do we show up as our true selves? Do we seek out others with kindness recognizing the power of service to bring us together? This work [of human connection] is not always easy. It requires courage. The courage to be vulnerable, to take a chance on others, to believe in ourselves. But as we build connected lives, we make it possible to build a connected world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My friends in Christ, may you savor your identity as a living stone, a vital stone in the dwelling place of God on earth. May you claim your calling to connect with other living stones in ways that tip the world toward love. Amen.

ⁱ Dr. Vivek Murthy and Brene Brown on Loneliness and Connection, *Unlocking Us* podcast, April 21, 2020, www.brenebrown.com/unlockingus/.

ⁱⁱ “Em’s Story as Told by Her Father,” shared by Elizabeth Sholes, California Council of Churches email, May 4, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vivek H. Murthy, MD, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).