

A House of Mercy
1 Peter 2: 4-10
Blades Chapel | UDTS | October 2, 2023
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On the first day of the semester, my theology classes are each made up of 20 strangers. They're strangers to me and mostly strangers to one another.

Then the work of building a community begins.
We start by learning names, and then move into the deeper stuff.

Layer upon layer, stone upon stone, we build until – sometime around week 5 or 6 – about right about where we are now – something amazing happens:
We aren't strangers anymore.
We have become a community.

Have you ever felt this happen?
Maybe in a classroom, or on a team?
Maybe here in chapel or in a discipleship group?

Whether you have or whether you're still searching for pockets of belonging, today's text holds good news for all of us.

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Our text today comes from an ancient letter written to early Christians. They were "outsiders," strangers in the surrounding culture, and they were experiencing hostility and harassment.

The letter encourages them in their lives of faith by reminding them *who they are* and presenting to them a vision of Christian community.

The letter says, "Like living stones,
let yourselves be built into a spiritual house."

Then, to describe this community, the letter uses language from various parts of the Hebrew Scriptures.

It says, you are: "a chosen people, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's own people."

Each of these images evokes episodes in Israel's story in which the character of God is on full display—hearing their distress, acting on their behalf, and inviting them into covenant relationship.

In other words, *who you are* is because of *who God is*.
This is as true for the recipients of this letter as it is for us.

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We, too, are *being built* into a spiritual house – and construction is underway.
In fact, the cornerstone has already been laid.

A cornerstone is the first stone set in place in new construction.
It must be chosen carefully: a stone with perfect right angles, straight lines, and a level surface – just right, in every way.

The shape of the cornerstone determines the shape and integrity of the whole building. Every stone layered on and next to it follows its lines.
Pick the wrong one, and the whole building will be built up out of whack, with bad angles and leaning walls.

The cornerstone on which our lives are being built is the Mercy of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Your identity is not the grades you have received,
the points you have scored,
the interviews you have nailed,
or the exams you have failed.
It is not what you have done or what you have left undone.

Your identity is found in the mercy you have received.

Mercy is the cornerstone on which our life together in Christian community is being built.

Mercy is our way of life together
and sharing that mercy is our common purpose in the world.

But the letter says something disconcerting.
It says that this cornerstone – the mercy of God made known in Jesus – causes some to stumble and fall.
It says that “this is the cornerstone the builders reject.”

Perhaps this is not so surprising.

Remember: the shape of the cornerstone determines the shape of the whole house.

The builders can see it plain as day:
building on the cornerstone of mercy
will shape a house out of whack by the standards of the world.

Afterall:

A house built on the cornerstone of mercy will have unseemly dimensions,
with spacious room to receive all with carrying large burdens
and long stories.

A house built on the cornerstone of mercy will not be well-insulated
from the cries of the poor, the sick, and the suffering,
the sighing of those beat down by injustice,
or from the groaning of the earth in its distress.

A house built on the cornerstone of mercy will have a strange design:
not a fortress, but *cruciform*
—shaped by the life of Jesus and the lines of his cross.
At the center stands a bath and a table without end.

A house built on the cornerstone of mercy will have wide, wide, wide doors
—so wide any certified builder would stumble and fall
just looking at the plans!—
and these wide doors are flung open to welcome all.

And the roof will be raised by the humming and drumming
and singing of all the people—known and named and chosen—
proclaiming the stories of all the mighty acts of God.

Who can imagine such a house?

Who can imagine such a people? Such a *God* as they worship!

It is enough to make us stumble in disbelief and awe.

But this is God's rock-solid promise to us:

that even as we stumble,

God's abundant mercy is gathering us in, building us up together, and giving us
to be a sign of God's presence and promises in the world.

So come to him, a living stone: precious, chosen, forgiven, and free.
Let our life together be shaped by the one who is our cornerstone:
 Christ the crucified,
 Christ the Living,
 Christ the Mercy of God.

Amen