

What Happens Here Doesn't Stay Here

I Peter 2:4-10

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 21, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like 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. ⁶For 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.”

⁷To 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,”

⁸and

“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.

⁹But 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.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (I Peter 2:4-10, NRSV)

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I want to begin by telling you a story. It's a parable really, a simple story that can teach us something profound. And though Jesus didn't ever tell this particular parable, he told some that were quite like it. Perhaps you've heard it before, maybe even from me.

Many years ago on a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often used to occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, really. They only had one boat. But it was enough, and the few devoted members of this outfit kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought of their own safety, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Because of their valiant efforts, many lives were saved.

Eventually some of those who were saved, along with others in the surrounding community, wanted to become associated with the station and began to give their own time and money and energy to support its work. New boats were purchased. New crews were trained. In time, the little lifesaving station began to grow. Some members, however, began to be unhappy that the little building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable setting should be provided as the first refuge for those who were saved from the sea. So they enlarged the building, replaced the emergency cots with beds, and outfitted it with beautiful and exquisite furnishings. It wasn't long before the station was so comfortable that it became a gathering place for its members, almost like a clubhouse.

It was so comfortable that over time fewer and fewer members were interested in actually going out to sea on lifesaving missions. So with the extra funds from their regular dues they hired lifeboat crews to do this work on their behalf. Of course, the lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations and conversation. There was even a miniature lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held, serving as a reminder of their original mission.

About this same time a large ship was wrecked in a terrible storm just off the coast and the hired crews bought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them were clearly from a very different part of the world, speaking different languages and practicing strange customs. The beautiful new clubhouse was in chaos. The board of directors met immediately and overwhelmingly approved the construction of a shower

house built just outside the club where victims of future shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next club meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to put an end to the club's lifesaving activities, arguing that they had become an unpleasant hindrance to the normal social life of the club. A small group of members, however, insisted that lifesaving had always been their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station and had a replica of a lifeboat right in the main meeting room. Ultimately, this vocal minority was voted down and told that if they wanted to continue their efforts they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast, which they did.

Funny thing is, as the years went by that new station eventually experienced the same changes that had occurred in the original station. It too evolved into a club and yet another lifesaving station was formed even further down the coast. History repeated itself several times over so that if you were to travel to that particular stretch of sea coast today you will find a great number of very exclusive clubhouses dotted up and down the coastline. Shipwrecks, of course, are still frequent in those dangerous waters but now, tragically, most of the people drown within sight of land.¹



Every time I hear that parable I'm convicted. It raises such an important question. Is this church building a lifesaving station or a clubhouse? And if it's a lifesaving station, how nice a lifesaving station does it need to be? At what point have we fixed up the crude shack so much that it's become a clubhouse, no longer suitable for the purpose for which it was originally constructed?

I am so grateful for the spirit of this church. Many of you know the story of how the first members of our congregation, some who are still here among us, initially decided to put up a structure at this site on 625 Florin Road. The story by now is legendary, but it's true. At that time, as I understand it, there was a split in our membership. After years of meeting in rented spaces, dance studios and other church buildings, some felt like it was time for Faith to have its own space. Our denomination had provided this ideal piece of property, the resources were there to build, and the benefits would be great. Many in the church argued that the time was right. Others, however, disagreed. They knew that buildings are not cheap. They are not cheap to build and they are not cheap to maintain. These people argued that those resources could better be used for mission. Every dollar spent on bricks and mortar was one less dollar spent on reaching those beyond us who did not yet know the love and grace of Christ.

In the end I believe the church made a wise decision. They decided that it did not need to be either/or, but could be both/and. Yes, we needed a building but that building must always be dedicated to the mission Christ has given us in this community and beyond. And since that original construction in the 1970's every subsequent addition to this facility, including our most recent expansion, has only been agreed upon under those same conditions. From the very beginning this church has rightly recognized the danger articulated in the lifesaving station parable and therefore has been very careful over the years to do whatever we can do to make sure this building does not become a clubhouse.

Of course, the tension will always exist. That's why today, on this day we have set aside to make commitments to paying off the mortgage of our expansion to our lifesaving station, I chose the passage we just read from I Peter. There is a lot to learn here in this text, but I want to focus today on Peter's reminder to us that it is the people, not the buildings, which are the church.

In Peter's day every Jew knew what God's house was. It was the sacred Temple in Jerusalem. That was the place on earth where God's presence most powerfully dwelt. But with the coming of Christ, and especially with his death and resurrection, everything had changed. Specifically, God's Kingdom was now not just for Jews but for all people. And *all* time was blessed, not just certain days and seasons. Lastly, no longer only some, but *all places* on earth could be called sacred and holy, found to be full of the Spirit of Christ which had exploded across creation.

So Peter invites his readers, **“Come to [Christ], a living stone...and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...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.”**²

¹ I'm not sure the original source of this modern day parable. It can be found in several places online.

² I Peter 2:4,9

Now it is the people, and not the place, where God, in Christ, most tangibly dwells on this earth. Christ is the foundation, the cornerstone, of this new living Temple. We, as his followers, are living stones being built up into this structure. This means, of course, that the church is not the building but the people. The building is just a place where the church often meets, a headquarters if you will. The stone and wood of this building are not sacred in and of themselves, but only sacred when they are set apart for the work of God's mission by his people. In the same way, even the wood and stone of your own house, if they also are set aside for that same work, are just as sacred. Same for the wood and stone of your office building, your school, the coffee shop you regularly frequent, or the movie theater downtown, wherever you go with the light of Christ is a sacred place because Christ is there.

You see, Peter makes clear that as God's living Temple we exist to proclaim to the world all the things that Christ has done - the grace, the life, the hope he offers through his death and resurrection to anybody who would come to him in faith. So wherever God's people are being prepared to be sent with this mission, and wherever they find themselves when they are sent out, that is holy ground.

In January we explored together the three-dimensional life of Jesus, looking to see how we, like Christ, are called first to make our relationship upwards with our Father in Heaven primary in life, second to make our relationship inward with one another in the church also central, and third to make our relationship outwards to the hurting world beyond us also a priority. The truth is, the "up" and the "in" don't make sense unless they ultimately lead to the "out". In fact, the church may be the only organization in the world that exists on this earth primarily for the benefit of its non-members! And so this building, as our headquarters, is merely that, the place from which we are sent out.

Las Vegas has gotten a lot of mileage out of branding itself as the city where "whatever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" even though the statement, of course, is not true. What happens in Vegas never really stays in Vegas. Still, it is clever marketing. But we can never even pretend this is true of the church. What happens here in this building can never stay here in this building. In fact, most all of what happens here is meant to have a direct impact on all that happens beyond here. Our worship, our study, our prayer, our fellowship, help shape us as Christ's people who are called to follow him out into the world to give ourselves away for the sake of those he wants to save. Those who are saved may be brought back here but then only so that they, themselves, can be sent out again. This is a lifesaving station, not a clubhouse.

And though we have invested some significant time, money and energy into expanding our lifesaving station recently, it is so good to see that already this new space is being used in accordance to our original mission.

For example, since we now have the room to do this, many, many more people are gathering for adult Sunday school classes to experience the sort of spiritual formation every Christian needs to be equipped to engage a lost and unbelieving world with the Gospel. I loved seeing so many of you take part in our recent Faith & Science forum. I trust that those who did now find yourselves more prepared to graciously engage with a friend who objects to your faith because he wrongly believes Christianity simply can't be reconciled with science.

I think about the person who comes here for the funeral of a loved one. It's been years since she's set foot in a church but she, along with hundreds of others, is here in this building seeking a place to grieve and looking for hope in the midst of such loss. That day in these pews she hears a message of good news she didn't expect to hear. Later on down the hall at the reception she and others are served by deacons who treat them with far more compassion and kindness than she thought the church was capable of. At the end of the day she leaves impressed with the building, but changed forever by what she has experienced in the building.

I loved what Rudy Buehler said last week about our new Youth Room. He pointed out that when you are given your own room in a house, that's when you know that that house has now become your home. By including a new Youth Room in our expansion, we have sent a very clear message to our young people and to any young people who come here in the future: you have a home here. But like all kids, we do expect you some day to grow up and move out of the house. I don't want my four kids living in their same rooms in my house 20 years from now. They are there now so that we can prepare them to follow God's lead out into the world. Same is true here, and I love hearing stories of some of our former youth who are now scattered abroad but exercising a still-growing faith which had its roots here because we made a home for them here.

I imagine the person who comes here for the first time on a First Sabbath Sunday and sticks around after the service to join us all in our beautiful courtyard and in that short time with us out there gets a taste of the joy and life that comes as a part of this family. My family uses our own backyard at home often to host people as they join us around a meal to laugh, and celebrate and savor life. We've worked hard on our backyard so that when guests come into that space in our home it provides a place for them to experience the joy we have in our family. I believe the same thing will happen here in our 'backyard' and in many cases lead new people to want to be a regular part of what they have experienced here.

Finally, I love it that our new space is already being used by other groups and organizations which are doing good work in our community. This isn't our house; it's God's house. And we're certain that God wants it occupied by anybody who shares in his mission. Some years ago a friend of mine first came to this church because she was coming to the AA meetings which met in our building. Because of her addiction to alcohol, her life was a wreck. But in AA she was given hope, hope that there was a God who existed who could save her life. When she decided to find a church she chose this one simply because, as she put it to me, "if your church was willing to host AA and support the work they are doing, I should at least give your church a try." She did, and it was eventually in this sanctuary that she came to faith in Christ and was baptized.

Now, that's not going to happen to every person that comes into this building, but we want to at least create the space here for God to work like this in people's lives. I love it that Bible Study Fellowship has 250 or more women here every Tuesday morning, meeting in every crack and crevice in this building. I love it that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has found a home here. Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and Narcotics Anonymous meet here every week. Just recently Rotary, Pocket Little League and Kennedy High School have used our building to do their good work. If you know of other groups working to do good things in our community but lacking the space to do their work, let us know and we can see how we might be able to support them. Again, what happens here is never meant to stay here.

Along with many of you, I am grateful that God has blessed us with this wonderful facility to use in these ways. I'm grateful to all of you for the incredible sacrifice of time, energy and money so generously given to see this new expansion materialize. On this Commitment Sunday, part of what I want to do is tell you I think it's all been worth it. Because we waited for God's leading, and then took time to carefully plan and pray before we acted, I believe we now have an extraordinarily beautiful and functional facility here which will serve the outward-focused mission of this church for many years to come.

Today, as you know, we have one final push to make. We owe on a mortgage that we want to pay off in three years. That's our goal. We've given some interest money to the bank already and that is inevitable, but we don't want to give the bank any more than we have to. As some of you already heard, if we can pay off our debt in three years we will save about \$500,000 in interest. Now I'm not sure what the bank would do with that \$500,000, but I am sure that we could put it to better use than they would.

I want to thank you in advance for the generous pledges that many of you are about to make. I've been around here long enough to know that each person here will give as they are able and as God leads them to give. No gift is too small. We had some of our children and youth make pledges in our original campaign and I believe God used even their small gifts to do something big. Also, no gift is too large. Some of us find ourselves in a place in life where we have significant funds we can give to this effort and we're willing to do so because we believe doing so is an eternal investment in the Kingdom.

For me, this has been the first time I've ever been a part of a significant building project in any church. I've been surprised to find how much joy it has brought me. Years from now, perhaps even long after I'm gone from here, I will still look back with joy knowing that Christ used my family's gift to help build a structure here that will be used for years to come as a place where his people gather to express their love to Christ and then allow him to equip them and send them out to share that love with the world. Like you, I'm very glad I have been a part of helping to build a lifesaving station rather than a clubhouse. I'm grateful that together we have carried on the spirit of those who first founded this church and made sure that even if we build a building, when we do we make certain that what happens here doesn't stay here!

Amen.



The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read I Peter 2:4-10. What stands out to you here from this passage?
2. Peter describes the church as “living stones” built upon the foundation of Christ, *the Living Stone*. What do Peter’s words teach us about the church? Is Peter trying to correct some misunderstanding here?
3. Peter declares that the mission of the church is to “proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Are we embracing this mission here at Faith? How so?
4. Consider the Lifesaving Station parable that Jeff retold. What is the main lesson you take from this parable?
5. Can you share an illustration of how you have seen our new addition already used as a lifesaving station?
6. In your estimation, what is one way we can make sure we are better using our buildings as a lifesaving station so that what happens here doesn’t stay here?
7. What do you think might a next step of faith God is calling us to take as a congregation?



Table to Table Question

Questions for kids and adults to answer together

What do you think is the most important part of our church building? Why?