

“Newborns and Stones and Priests”

Rev. Eric. S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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1 Peter 2:2-10

When Bart and Lisa Campolo were young, their dad, Dr. Tony Campolo, well known Christian author and speaker, traveled the world on speaking tours while his wife Peggy stayed home and raised their children. On those rare occasions when she did travel with him, Peggy was often intimidated by the accomplished, sophisticated and influential people that came to hear her husband speak. When she shared her feelings with Tony, he suggested she come up with something that described how strongly she valued her work at home.

Not long after that, Tony and Peggy Campolo were at a party where a woman asked Peggy in a rather condescending tone, "Well, my dear, what do you do?" She responded, "I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time."

And the other woman said: "O, my, I'm just a lawyer."

Today is the day we celebrate mothers of all different varieties, whether lawyers or Homo Sapiens nurturers, or any of a huge variety of roles. When we celebrate mothers and motherhood, I am aware that it is a subject that is, for many, one that brings some level of pain in the midst of the celebration. I am aware that some of us gathered today may have hurtful memories of their mother and may not feel like celebrating. I am aware that some of us gathered today have experienced loss of pregnancy and children and often Mother's Day can bring back those painful memories. I am aware that some of the women here are not mothers in the traditional sense and may feel somewhat excluded. There are others who may long to be mothers, but that dream has not yet come true for them. There are those who are missing their mother on this special day, and so there is grief. Yes, Mother's Day is a day on which churches and pastors must be careful. We must be sensitive to the situations in which people find themselves. We must not add hurt to people who are already hurting, and so celebrating Mother's Day is a tricky proposition.

At the same time, I see in this congregation wonderful mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers who are showing the love of Christ to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and the children of others. I see women who are mothers to those who are not born of them, whether by formal or informal adoption or just by being a loving example of what God asks of each of us in nurturing and caring for others. And, whether or not the mothers of our births were able to show us the love that they should, we can all have a level of gratitude, for without them, we would not be here.

So, I think it is appropriate that we celebrate Mothers in the church today, while being sensitive to the pain that many may be feeling. Our text from the epistles today speaks to all of us, wherever we find ourselves today, with some parallels to the nurturing aspects of good mothers.

The passage first compares people of faith to newborn infants, needing milk to grow and so our minds probably immediately jump to how mothers nourish their children with milk. It is an apt metaphor Peter uses. Those who are new to the faith need sustaining spiritual milk just as newborns need milk. By this spiritual milk, Peter says, the recipients may grow into salvation. This nurture comes through others. Each of us in the church has received spiritual nourishment *through* other people of faith. We do not go about the journey of faith alone. We are part of a household, a family of faith, nurtured by the Word of God and by one another. We give gratitude for those who have nurtured us.

Peter changes metaphors next, and it's an interesting one. He says we should come to Jesus, the "living stone." Now, I'm no geologist, but I don't think that stones are living. One resource for third graders describes the characteristics of non-living things this way: "Non-living things don't breathe, eat, grow, or reproduce. They are things like rocks, air, crayons, cars, rubber duckies..."¹ So whether it's a rubber ducky or a rock, it's not alive. I suppose that makes this metaphor even more vibrant. Though stones are not usually alive, *this* stone – Jesus – is indeed alive. This stone is different from others. This living stone is used to build not an ordinary temple, but God's spiritual temple. We go from speaking of the household of God, to the actual house itself. Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16 to speak of the cornerstone that God has placed, which he understands to be Jesus. So this geological oddity – a living stone – is what our divine creator has chosen to build the house of God. A cornerstone is vitally important to the building. The cornerstone was placed first. It was the largest, most solid, and most carefully selected or constructed stone. All

¹ http://utahscience.oremjr.alpine.k12.ut.us/sciber06/3rd/stand_2/html/2_1b.htm

other stones are set in reference to the cornerstone, so it is of vital importance. It must be set with utmost care so that the entire house starts with a solid foundation. However, with only one stone, even the most important cornerstone, you don't have a building. So, then Peter goes on in verse 5 to say that we too are like living stones, and we are built into this spiritual house. Still, even with the cornerstone and one other stone, you don't have a house. That is why this is written in the plural. **We** are living stones, *together* built into a spiritual house. The old temple has passed away and Jesus is building a new temple, using **us** as the very building materials. And we are more like stones than bricks. I picture bricks as these uniform and standardized. It doesn't really matter which brick goes where in the building. Stones, on the other hand, I picture as unique and varied. In order to build with stones, you must choose where each stone will go, in relation to the cornerstone and to the other stones. *This* is the kind of spiritual house that Jesus is building us into – not one of uniformity, where each one of us has the same function, but one where each of us has a unique function. Jesus will use each of us in the building of this spiritual house in the ways he sees that we fit into the whole structure. Many of you know that I spent a week in St. Louis recently, training to be a Stephen Leader in the Stephen Ministry of our congregation. One of the points they made was to find the right people for the role of Stephen Ministers. The wrong person in the role can do much more harm than good. That is true for all of the ministries of a congregation. A person carrying out the wrong role can do more harm than good, for the congregation and the person, themselves. This is not the intention of Jesus, as he builds us into a spiritual house, so we must use discernment as Jesus does in choosing which stone goes where. A builder may also need to remove part of the stone in order for it to be used for its intended purpose, and Jesus does this as well with us when building with us. We may have habits or behaviors which are not useful to the spiritual house, and so Jesus works on each of us to knock off the rough edges to shape us into the living stones he needs us to be.

I see good nurturing mothers performing similar roles in our lives. In many families, moms are quite often the ones at the forefront of working with Jesus to shape us, to guide us, to set us in the right direction. Good Moms see their children as unique, and help them to find the right place for them to fit in. I am one of four boys, and each of us has gone in different directions in life. In addition to a minister, there's an engineer, a schoolteacher, and a businessman. If our mother had thought of each of us as the same, steering us all on the same path, we would all likely be in the wrong roles for our lives. We often hear of stories of children whose parents pushed them to be something they were not really intended to be, and sometimes with tragic results. I give thanks for the Moms who nurture their children as unique individuals, helping to shape them along the

way into the people God created them to be. Again, this is not something that happens alone. This happens in the context of the community, and we must work with each other to ensure that the community of faith plays a strong role in that nurture.

In the end of our passage, the imagery shifts again, using descriptions of the children of Israel to apply to the Christian community. Given different understandings of the word “race,” I would prefer an alternate translation to what we have as “you are a chosen race.” The Contemporary Version has this as “You are God’s chosen and special people.” Each of us is chosen and special to our God. We are unique and beautiful stones. Then, Peter says we are “a royal priesthood,” emphasizing the point that the ministry of God’s people does not belong to the clergy. It rests in the hands of each of us – God’s own people, servants of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. As *The Message* puts it, “you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God’s instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.”

From newborns, to part of God’s house, to God’s holy priesthood, we are nurtured in the faith, shaped for a purpose, and given a mission. As Eugene Boring, the noted Biblical commentator with an unfortunate name, puts it “the church as the people of God is called into being not for its own sake, but as an expression of the divine mission to the world, and is itself charged with a mission.”²

So, while we lift up the gifts of God known as mothers today, we give thanks for the role of **all** who nurture us, shape us, and send us forth, just as the Living Stone, Jesus Christ, does. May we live up to the calling God has for each of us. We are all chosen and precious, so let’s share with the world the saving grace of our God. Amen.

²*New Interpreter's Bible: One Volume Commentary*, p. 902.