

SERMON TITLE: "God's People"  
SERMON TEXT: 1 Peter 2:1-1-10  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 2, 2019, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Well, if you like professional basketball, this is a big week. On Thursday night, the Golden State Warriors and the Toronto Raptors played the first game in their season-ending play-off series. Toronto won that game 118-109. Tonight, at 7:00, those two best NBA teams will face off again.

The Golden State team will be recognizable in their royal blue and California gold uniforms, with the stylized picture of the east span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge within a basketball-shaped circle. In contrast, the Toronto Raptors' jerseys are very simple, with just names and numbers. The Canadian team was organized in 1993, the year that the *Jurassic Park* movie came out. So they originally had a dinosaur picture on their logo. Over time, the dinosaur design became less purple and more red and evolved into a three-fingered paw print over a basketball inside a hoop. At this point, the Raptors' uniforms don't show the paw-print circle. But you'll be able to figure out who they are. The Toronto Raptors will be the ones dressed in red and black and white.

Teams, troops, and groups of people are known by many traits and symbols—by the songs they sing, by the flags they wave, by the values they hold dear, by the stories they tell. Those common elements gather, shape, and hold a people together. Those traits give them encouragement, identity, and promise. Those uniform experiences and characteristics give meaning to their lives and purpose to their sacrifices and deaths.

Because that reality of all social groups is also true for Christians, I invite you this morning to take a look at 1 Peter, chapter 2, with me. Let's see what traits identify and describe God's people.

### **1—DRINK PURE, SPIRITUAL MILK**

A good place to begin is in verse 2, where First Peter tells us that God's people drink pure, spiritual milk. Just like newborn babies, the first and most natural impulse of newborn Christians is to seek the milk of life. We need it, we instinctively desire it, we long for the milk which will give us nourishment and strength.

There are many ways for someone to become a Christian. Possibly the majority of us here today became Christians because we were raised in Christian families and taught Christian beliefs from the time we were small children. All we had to do was confirm and claim that faith as our own. Some of us strayed away from the teachings of our childhood and later had to make a conscious decision to return to a Christian way of life. Some of us weren't raised as Christians and had to come to Christian faith through a more radical kind of conversion. No matter how we became Christians, however, we have all needed the pure, spiritual milk that only God can offer. We have all been babes in Christ, children of God, who needed to grow into maturity of faith.

Obviously, the idea of milk is a metaphor for the nourishing sustenance we get from God. Pure, spiritual milk is the water of baptism. It's the encouragement and growth we gain from reading scripture and attending Christian education classes. Pure, spiritual milk is the faith-filled support of our Christian brothers and sisters. It's the hope and promise of prayer and the purpose and meaning of mission outreach. Pure, spiritual milk is the strength we find in worship, and the assurance we gain from God's love.

When you think of milk, you think of calcium that builds strong teeth and bones. We have long known that babies and little kids need lots of calcium, but we now also know how important calcium is throughout our lives. We women, especially, need large daily doses of calcium to prevent osteoporosis. The same idea is true for spiritual milk. It isn't just for baby Christians. We never stop needing the nutrients of prayer, scripture, and the sacrament of holy communion. We never mature beyond the

need for the support of our fellow Christians. We certainly never outgrow the need for God's assurance and love. No matter what our age, God's people drink pure, spiritual milk.

## **2—ARE BUILT UPON THE LIVING STONE**

According to 1 Peter 2:4-8, a second trait that defines God's people is that we are built upon the living stone. Jesus is the cornerstone, the foundation upon which our faith is constructed. The image of a rock is common in the scriptures. As we read in our Call to Worship from Psalm 31, God is often referred to as our rock and fortress. The idea is that God is strong and immovable. God is solid and will protect us from the forces of nature and the struggles of life.

We need a rock like Jesus in our lives—not only to shelter us, but also to keep us standing upright. You all know about the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. That 12-story tower of solid marble took 200 years to build and had already begun to lean before it was completed in 1372. The problem was that that the tower was built on *pisa*, which means *marshy land*. The tower's ten-foot foundation just wasn't enough to stabilize the soggy ground—and, until recent repair work was done—the tower was at risk of collapse. Fortunately, as God's people, we have a sure foundation that can keep us standing.

It's interesting, though, that—in addition to the image of “cornerstone”—First Peter also uses the image of Christ and us as “living stones.” That implies not just enduring rock-hard strength, but also some flexibility. As I was reading about the Leaning Tower of Pisa, I learned that, in spite of its leaning fragility, it has actually survived four major earthquakes. The theory is that the same soggy marsh that caused the tower to lean more than 17 feet off plumb has also buffered it from the violent shocks of shifting tectonic plates. Instead of breaking, the tower was able to roll with the punches. In this time of turbulence in our United Methodist Church, maybe that's a bit of wisdom for us. Maybe it's good for us to realize that part of what makes Christ a strong foundation is his flexibility to rise from the dead and live on through the unique challenges of every generation.

As God's people, we have the opportunity to be living stones together with Christ. As we live in solidarity with Christ, we're linked together into living walls that bend and flex rather than break from rigidity. A song that we used to sing at conference youth events proclaimed, "Jesus is the Rock, and he rolls my blues away." That song was a fun way of reminding ourselves that our lasting strength comes from the fact that God's people are built upon the living stone.

### **3—RECEIVE GOD'S MERCY**

It's hard to imagine anything more basic than drinking pure, spiritual milk or being built upon the living stone. But, in 1 Peter 2:10, we see that what characterizes God's people even before those two things is that God's people receive God's mercy. Before we can drink spiritual milk, we have to be born in Christ. Before we can be built upon the foundation of the living stone, we have to become living stones ourselves. At the most basic level, these are not things we do. These are things God does. God initiates our birth and our rebirth through God's gracious acts of mercy.

In 1 Peter 2:9, we read, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. That description sounds pretty wonderful, but we must remember that we aren't chosen because of how royal or holy we already are or were on our own. We are God's people now because God chose to make us so. God reached out to us with mercy and redeemed us as God's own people.

In some Christian traditions, this initiative of God has been referred to as *predestination*. The idea is that before we were ever born, God chose to give mercy to those who would be God's people. The tricky part about predestination is that it implies that God also chose not to give mercy to some people—that some persons would never be God's people.

In our United Methodist Wesleyan tradition we have a different belief. We call it *prevenient grace*. Like predestination, prevenient grace is a mercy that comes before. But unlike predestination, prevenient grace emphasizes the fact that God chooses everyone to receive mercy. No one is left out of the offer, and everyone has been given free will to accept or reject God's forgiveness and grace. No

matter who we've been, no matter what we've done—when we accept and receive God's mercy, we immediately become a part of God's people.

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this past week, there were many volunteers here at the church to set up and work the annual rummage sale. When it was over, more people came to help clean it all up and set up for our Vacation Bible School that will begin tomorrow. As I observed and participated in those activities, I realized that I was seeing some important and identifying characteristics of God's people. Engaged in fundraising for mission outreach, preparing for Christian education of children, and working together in a coordinated effort, God's people were busy serving as the hands and feet of Christ in our community.

God's people can be recognized in many ways. First Peter 2 touches on some of the most basic traits and features. We drink pure, spiritual milk. We are built on the living stone. And we receive God's mercy.

In conclusion, I invite you to read in unison with me the lyrics that are printed on the front of our bulletins. This verse goes really well with today's scripture:

We are God's people, the chosen of the Lord,  
born of the Spirit, established by the Word.  
Our cornerstone is Christ alone,  
and strong in Christ we stand;  
O let us live transparently  
and walk heart to heart and hand in hand.\*

When others observe us in our individual lives and see us gathered as a church, let there be no doubt that we are God's people.

\*Lyrics by Brian Jeffery Leech, 1976, in *The Faith We Sing* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2000), #2219.