

SERMON TITLE: “God’s People”

SERMON TEXT: 1 Peter 2:1-10

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: May 5, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

As we’ve all been hearing, Utah is soon to become home to a National Hockey League team. The Arizona Coyotes will move from Phoenix to Salt Lake City. New names under consideration include the Utah Venom, Blizzard, Yetis, Outlaws, Mammoth, and Fury. I assume that logos and colors will be decided quickly after the name, so that fans can start buying and wearing the supportive merchandise.

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, and by the stories they tell. Those common elements gather, shape, and hold a people together. Those traits give them identity, encouragement, and promise. Those uniform experiences and characteristics give meaning to their lives and purpose to their dedication and sacrifices.

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

1—DRINK PURE, SPIRITUAL MILK

A good place to begin is 1 Peter 2:2, which 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, and 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 and 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. Calcium from food and supplements helps prevent osteoporosis and bone fractures. 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 A LIVING STONE

According to 1 Peter 2:4-8, a second trait that defines God's people is that we are built upon a living stone. Jesus is the cornerstone, the foundation upon which our faith is constructed.

The image of a rock is common in the scriptures. God is often referred to as our rock, fortress, and strong foundation. This same idea is conveyed in the hymn we sang: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Indeed, it is “on Christ the solid rock [we] stand.” We need a rock like Jesus in our lives to shelter us and 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 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 repair work was done in the 1990s—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 foundational 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 change 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 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 a flexible, relevant, and living stone.

3—RECEIVE GOD’S MERCY

It’s hard to imagine anything more basic than drinking pure, spiritual milk or being built upon Christ, 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 Christ’s 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 salvation 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 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 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 could 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 reject or accept God’s forgiveness and grace. No matter who we’ve been, God is always ready for us. No matter what we’ve done, God’s mercy came first. The teaching is clear: God’s people are all who receive God’s mercy.

CONCLUSION

Over the past two weeks, I was glued to the news and livestream from our United Methodist General Conference that ended on Friday. I'm happy to report that this global meeting was much more harmonious than our General Conferences have been for decades. While the big split in our United Methodist denomination has been painful, finally, it seems, we have come to the place where the knock-down, drag-out fights are over. As the delegates voted, large majorities agreed on petition after petition to regionalize our global structure, to revise our Social Principles, and to remove language and policies that had restricted LGBTQ people. The nearly 800 delegates also voted to reduce the budget and change the clergy pension plan so the finances and ministries of the church would be more sustainable. While many previous General Conferences were characterized by tears of emotional distress, this General Conference was characterized by tears of relief and joy. Finally, we have seen ourselves as a unified gathering of God's people.

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're built upon a living stone. And we receive God's mercy.

One of our hymns says it this way:

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 or see us gathered as a church, let there be no doubt that we are God's people.

*Brian Jeffery Leech, c. 1976 Fred Bock Music Co.