

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”*

⁷ *Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,
“The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone,”*

⁸ *and,
“A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:4-10)*

Our Closest Mission Field

I was talking to Ruth Olson, our kindergarten teacher, last week and I found out that when she was installed her at Peace 39 years ago, the pastor made her sit in a chair in the front of the old church all through the service. Obviously, she respected him more than she respects me, because I couldn't get her to sit in a chair in front here this morning. But you know what? I really would not want her do that because I agree with something that she said to me a couple of months ago when we were talking about this service. Ruth told me that today's service shouldn't be about her. It should be about Christian Education. That's what she came here to do 39 years ago. That's what she's been a part of ever since. Only a truly faithful servant of the Word would want the spotlight to be on the Word and the power of God working in that Word on a day like today. It's only right that we honor her request. So I haven't changed the readings. The gospel lesson, the Old Testament lesson, even the sermon text this morning are exactly the same as they would've been if today weren't our service of thanksgiving on the occasion of her retirement. Yet, these readings are wonderfully appropriate for a day like today because they talk about coming to Christ and the changes that makes in us, his people. They talk about what it means to be God's Church.

What is the most important thing a congregation can do? Some people might answer without even a pause and say, “It's reaching out to the lost.” But that is not what Jesus says. When he gave us the great commission, he told us to make disciples. That really means two things: it does mean bringing the gospel to people who haven't heard it so that God gives them faith. But it also means nurturing the faith of those people so that they live for Christ and so that they remain in their faith until they reach eternal life. So mission work is not just reaching out to the lost. Mission work is proclaiming the gospel. If you think of it that way, you have to realize that we have a mission field very close to us. I don't mean right outside our windows. There is a mission field there, to be sure, and we would be unfaithful if we didn't do our best to reach it. But there is even a closer mission field. It's right in our homes. It's the children God has given us. Those children are **our closest mission field**. For 39 years, the Holy Spirit called Ruth to serve in that mission field.

Every child is born a sinner. He or she is born on the road to hell. And it is our responsibility as parents and as a congregation to reach out to those little heathen that are born to us. My friends, if I as a pastor reach out to thousands of people out there with the good news about Jesus but I fail to bring the three kids God gave me to the cross, have I been faithful? If I as a parent – if you as a parent – give money to support schools and high schools and world and home mission programs, but fail to take responsibility for the faith of our children, what kind of Christian parents are we? If we give our kids a first class college education and prepare them to face all the realities of life, but we fail to teach them to follow their Savior while they live here, what have we

accomplished? If we as a congregation have the greatest outreach program any church of the WELS ever saw, but we fail to nurture the faith of the kids that are born into our church, have we really fulfilled Christ's Great Commission? Have we made our children his disciples?

Peter says, **“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** The “you” here is really all of us who believe. We are being built into a spiritual house – a temple – and being made into a holy priesthood so that we can offer spiritual sacrifices to God. What does all that mean? Our spiritual sacrifices are all the changes we make in our lives because we know our Savior. Every minute that we spend here in church is a spiritual sacrifice we make out of love for Christ. Every dollar we give, every hour we serve the needs of our congregation is also a spiritual sacrifice. But spiritual sacrifices don't just consist of the things that we do for this congregation or inside this building. All that you do out there to live your faith is a spiritual sacrifice. The time you spend in prayer asking God to keep your children safe and to build up their faith is a spiritual sacrifice. The time you spend teaching them to know Jesus, teaching them to love each other and to treat other children with love and respect, is a spiritual sacrifice. Even the things you do for the good of others are spiritual sacrifices. Running your parents to their doctors appointments, helping your neighbor with that project that you can see is getting the best of him, treating your co-workers with respect. Every one of those things is a spiritual sacrifice when it comes from a heart of faith.

That heart of faith is what God charges us as parents and as a congregation to nurture. How do we accomplish that mission? Peter said, “as you come to him ... you are being built ... into a spiritual priesthood.” There's only one way to build a Christian life: by building Christian faith. The only way to do that is through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our job as parents didn't end when we brought our kids to be baptized. We have a life long mission of bringing them to Christ. That is the only thing that is going to make them the kind of people who sacrifice for God.

Do we understand that? So often, we parents slip into thinking that what our kids need is standard of living. All the other kids have X-boxes and Wee systems and ipods and cell phones. We feel guilty that our kids don't have those things. We think that we're denying them something they deserve. So often, we think that what they need is for us to cart them around to dance recitals and hockey practices and to shell out money for educational experiences. And none of those things are bad. But if our kids don't have those things, and yet they do have Christ, they have what Jesus called the one thing needful. But if they have all those other things, and we can't find the time to bring them to church, to Sunday School, or study the word with them in our homes so that they hear the gospel, we have failed as parents.

Peter called Jesus the Stone who was rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him. He's talking, of course, about how Christ came to Israel as the promised Savior. How he spent three years teaching and doing miracles so that they could see that he was the one they had been waiting to see for 1500 years. But the vast majority of them did not believe in him. He wasn't what they thought the Savior should be. They wanted something different. Of course, we're here because we know that Jesus is the one Savior God sent. But my friends, if we fail to bring our kids to Christ because we're too busy at work or we don't think we can afford the time or the money to get them a Christian education, if we spend all our effort on getting them toys and carting them to practices and events and opportunities, and we put getting them to Sunday school and catechism class in last place, haven't we really rejected Christ in favor of all those other things? If we make our children happy here, but we fail to provide for eternity for them, did we really love them?

That attitude that we so easily slip into is sin. It deserves hell – we deserve hell. But that's why Christ came. The stone the builders rejected was chosen by God to come into this world and die for our sin, even for the sin of us parents who fail again and again to see that the most important task God gave us is bringing our kids to Christ. Jesus died and paid for that sin. And God forgave us for all that sin and failure, as terrible as it is. When the time was right, God called us out of the darkness of sin and unbelief and he brought us into the light of Christ. God made sure that we know our Savior and that we trust in him. Because of that faith, when God looks at us, he sees perfect Christian parents who always put their children's faith in first place.

And now God calls us to live the way he sees us – to bring our children to Christ. Then we will see the result that Peter speaks of. He says, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his**

wonderful light.” These words actually come from the Old Testament. God used them to describe the people of Israel. So he’s saying that we, the New Testament Church, are the new Israel. Out of all the nations on earth, God has chosen us to be his people. Unlike in the Old Testament, you aren’t born into this people. You become a part of this people when the Holy Spirit gives you faith.

When you join the people of God, you become a part of the royal priesthood. In the Bible, a priest is someone who has the right to come to God and pray and offer sacrifices. In the Old Testament, God didn’t let ordinary people do that. They had to approach him through their priests. God was teaching them that sin separates us from him. It blocks our prayers and makes our offerings – our sacrifices – worthless to him. But now, it’s different. All believers are priests. All believers have the right to approach God because Jesus has washed our sins away.

All believers have the right to offer sacrifices. In this chapter, Peter equates those sacrifices with declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Knowing Christ changes us. If there is no change in your life, then you have no faith. Now, that does not mean we don’t struggle with sin. We all do, every day. In our hearts, we all have a sinful nature. That sinner inside us is lazy and egotistical. Everything is always all about him and he’s a hero in his own mind. We all have that part of us and it makes it hard to declare God’s praises. But you know what? Every effort against that sinner declares God’s praises. Every time you say, “I am going to get up and go to church,” you’re praising God. When you get here and sing the hymns and offer the prayers, you’re praising him even more. The greatest praise you can offer while you’re here is to close your mouth and open your heart and hear the good news about Jesus and his love. Every time you talk to your children about Christ, you’re praising him. Every time you treat the people around you the way that God would have you treat him, you’re giving glory to God in this world. You’re praising him.

But it all begins with him calling you out of darkness into his marvelous light. That’s why we have the holy ministry. That light is what Ruth’s primary purpose has been throughout these past 39 years here at Peace. Many of you have come today because you sat in her classes. You may remember her teaching you English or math or any number of other things. Those subjects are important. But math and English and social studies are not what the holy ministry is about. It’s about the gospel. It’s about bringing people to Christ our Savior. That’s what Ruth did here for 39 years – she taught us and our children to know Jesus. She reinforced the faith that hopefully we all learned at home.

Many of you have gathered here today to honor her for her service. I’m glad you’re here. It is good when the people of God thank faithful servants for the work they have done, especially as that time of public service draws to a close. But do you know what will really honor Ruth and her commitment to us and to Christ? Sharing her commitment to the gospel. Coming and hearing the word – the message she taught you, the message she has shared with our children all these years. Come and faithfully hear about Jesus. Her ministry was all about him. Put him at the heart of your life. There is no greater honor you can give Ruth and her ministry here. Amen.