

“Be built into a spiritual house...”

I Peter 2:1-10

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This is our fourth week on the letters of the New Testament in our whirlwind tour of little-known and short books of the Bible. The last two weeks we have spent time on the personal letters of Second Timothy and Third John. With First Peter, we revisit the circular letter type of a church leader to a group of faith communities. At the beginning of the month Janet discussed the Apostle Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia.

Today, we look at a letter that purports to be from the other great leader in the early church, the apostle Peter. I say “purports to be” because many biblical scholars dispute this claim. Whether or not you believe Peter to be the writer, the letter bears a great deal of authority for its first readers and for us today. It was not unusual for church leaders to write in the name of an apostle as a way of identifying themselves as belonging to that school or sharing the same authority. Whatever the name of the writer, the community understood that these words carried weight.

In suggesting that a student of Peter wrote the book, scholars are able to set the context later in the first century at a time when the faith community had separated from the synagogues. There is no indication of the controversy that arose when large numbers of Gentiles began to follow Jesus, a controversy that dominates the book of Galatians. We seem to have gone beyond the time when Jewish Christians could continue to practice faith in the synagogue, a time in fact that was likely after the martyrdom of Peter. But for the sake of simplicity, I’ll refer to the author as Peter.

The letter is written to the exiles of the dispersion suggesting that Peter’s audience is a group who have had to relocate for some reason. Some of them were likely Jews who had left Jerusalem during a time, perhaps, when the Romans were clamping down on rebellion. Some of them possibly new converts to the faith kicked out of the synagogue. As with many migrants, moving to a new place didn’t make life easier for them as much of Peter’s letter seems to address issues of how to get along in their new location. It’s critical that we understand in reading any part of this book that the faith community is a minority, and more importantly, that the culture is not only different, but actually hostile to the new faith.

So when we read in chapter 3 that “wives should submit to the authority of their husbands,” we should not take this as prescriptive for all time and every place. In fact Peter recommends this specifically to women whose husbands do not belong to the faith.

This was important because Romans looked on Christians as evil primarily because they only acknowledged one God. If you were a Roman, rejecting any of the gods could bring ruin on the entire household. “Good behavior” might enable the husband to see the faith differently. Similarly, one needs to look at the recommendations to slaves at the end of chapter two as “practical advice” rooted in the realities of the time and place. Both of these issues are very complex, but you’re less likely to go astray if you remember the importance of context and restrain yourself from looking for universal truths.

I don’t want to spend any more time on these problem passages, but I’d urge you to think about them on your own. I’d love to hear your thoughts and respond to questions you may have. It’s too simple to just discard them. Wrestling with a “problem text” is a healthy spiritual practice. But for now, let’s move on to some other things we know about the context.

The main goal of these circular letters in general and First Peter in particular is to nurture the faith community. They almost always address difficulties, some of which are external to the faith community, but more often internal. Paul addresses sectarianism, the misuse of spiritual gifts, the relationship of Jesus’ followers to the “law” among other issues in Corinth. He was in several of his letters concerned with those who set themselves above others in the faith community. James is concerned about those whose faith doesn’t align with its practice. And Peter worries about the health of faith communities in a hostile environment.

As I implied earlier, much of what he says falls in the category of practical advice that promotes harmony in the faith community and avoids conflict with the outside community. Activists struggle with this book because much of the advice aims at accommodation. Peter seems to be saying, “Don’t rock the boat!” much of the time. The transformation of society is not on his agenda... yet. I think we can say from the testimony of the rest of scripture that God wants all humans to be free, relationships to be mutual, and governments to be fair and just. Peter shares those values; but as I said, letters address realities. So Peter speaks tells the faith community how to be free in the midst of slavery. He offers women dignity under a hierarchical family structure. He undergirds his practical advice with a theological primer on the nature of the faith community. Put more simply, he tells them who they are, or as some like to say, whose they are!

The first ten verses of chapter two are a beautiful, almost poetic description of Christian community. Despite its beauty, it is not without its problems and abuses. It saddens me to see how Christians have used phrases such as “chosen race” to justify white supremacy; how they’ve used the “stumbling stone” of this passage to exclude Jews from the covenant of God’s grace. Peter is speaking encouraging words to a community that

knows suffering, that experiences exclusion. But when we use these words to set ourselves up as the privileged people of God, better than all the unbelievers, we abuse the spirit by which Peter writes. The text does not say, “you are a chosen race... and not others; you are a royal priesthood... and not others; you are a holy nation... and not others.” It is not an affirmation of white Christians in America!

And yet, if you will hear these words with a sense of humility, as a people whose faith is mocked, as a people booted from the synagogue, as a people denied access to opportunity, a people without freedom and hope; it will lift you up. Even if your “betters” condemn you, God extends mercy. Even if you’re the last one picked when choosing sides, God chooses you. Even if the city won’t let you rest your head on a park bench, God gives you a place of sacred rest. Even if your new country treats you as a second-class citizen, God welcomes you. With these words, Peter offers the faith community a home. There is no intent to deny others the same.

Are there those who don’t understand Jesus’ followers? There were then, and there are today as well. The world that values things over people don’t understand Jesus’ disciples. The world that values success, power, prestige, and position over compassion don’t get Christians. But Peter doesn’t condemn these people. He holds out hope that the witness of the faith community will “win them over.”

You are “precious in God’s sight.” Full stop! You don’t need to go on to “and others are not.” Instead of getting angry, feeling superior, becoming judgmental about others, Peter urges you to keep walking, to “be built into a spiritual house.” When I chose this text, this phrase jumped off the page for me. I love the rest of the text as it describes our relationship to God, emphasizing God’s love for this suffering community, but “being built into a spiritual house” gives me a place to go.

We are “living stones” not limited by our context. Not understood by the world: doesn’t matter. We are being built into a spiritual house. “Spiritual” has almost lost all meaning today. When a person says, “I’m spiritual, but not religious,” what do they mean beyond I don’t go to church? What does a person who climbs tall mountains mean when he describes it as a “spiritual” experience? Is it the same thing as a woman describing childbirth as “spiritual?” Or a football fan at a U of M game with 72,000 other fans? Some of us look at other people’s spiritual experiences as trivializing the sacred.

It’s easy to get lost in a debate around the meaning of “spiritual.” And just as easy to get lost in a search for the spiritual. But when I think about the teachings of Jesus, and other faith leaders of various traditions, I think that they would describe all moments in our lives

as spiritual. The search is not a search for the spiritual, but an awakening to the Spirit already present. Soren Kierkegaard believed that to be human was to be Spirit. Spirit describes our connection to the sacred within and beyond. Peter is urging the community to live in the awareness of God's constant presence.

To be spiritual is to see the connections beyond yourself. It is the spiritual that moves us beyond the limitations of the realities that restrict us. It's how the slave knows and longs for freedom; how the abused and oppressed grasp hope. Be built into a spiritual house invites us to breathe in the Spirit, to welcome the sacred love of God.

To be a house, or household, is to belong to something bigger than yourself, to know that you are not alone. You are connected to God and to others. Be built into a spiritual house encourages us to treasure the faith community, both a respite from the challenges of the world and an example of something better.

Be a spiritual house. This is what early church leaders were telling the faith communities in Galatia, Philippi, Rome, and other places where Christians found themselves. Peter, along with others, were trying to build up faith communities. Though the realities of our world may differ from theirs, the letters still speak to us. The message that we are precious to God still nurtures us. The reminder that we are not alone emboldens us to face the challenges of our day. There are details to sort out as you would expect between faith communities separated by a couple thousand years, but the connections with God and within the faith community are alive and able to sustain us for many years to come. Amen.