

Sermon (5/14/17, 1 Peter 2: 2-10):

During the summer after my daughter's birth, we made a trip south to introduce her to our extended family. We were very excited. I could hardly wait to introduce my precious daughter to grand-parents and uncles and other relatives.

Having never traveled with a little one before, it was quite the surprise to discover how much stuff she would require for the trip. Yet another new parent lesson: When traveling with kids, the amount of stuff they need is inversely related to their size.

Finally, we were on our way. It was a long journey and almost immediately our daughter began to cry. We quickly learned that she was not one of those kids easily lulled to sleep by the hum of a moving car. We tried everything - distractions, singing, toys, Mom moving to the back seat with her. Nothing worked. For hours upon hours she just kept crying and with each passing mile we grew more and more desperate.

For all you Moms and Dads out there on this Mother's Day, you probably remember the days before kids when you thought you were such an expert on parenting. You knew with certainty all the things you would do to avoid the mistakes your parents made. Well, that's what we thought too...at least until we became parents.

At our first stop for gas, we got out and walked around with our daughter in our arms. And, yes, as soon as she was taken out of the car seat, the crying stopped. After buying some soft serve ice cream in the convenience store, we headed back to the car. As soon as our daughter hit the car seat again, the crying resumed. We both looked at our cups of ice cream. We knew it was wrong. She was too young. It would be breaking the rules. It would not be good for her. Desperation got the best of us though. We did the unthinkable...we fed her ice cream. I'm not sure if this means our daughter will need therapy for the rest of her life for our momentary lapse of judgment but we just couldn't help ourselves. We filled a spoon and touched her lips with the ice cream. She licked the dab and, immediately, the crying stopped and her eyes popped wide open. She smiled as if to say, 'what is this magical cold stuff you touched my lips with? Give me more!'

What have we done, we wondered, feeling a little like Eve offering Adam the forbidden fruit. We mustn't ever tell her pediatrician. It will be our secret. We felt so guilty but, the quiet, oh the wonderful quiet! Yes, our corruption continued as we fed her even more dabs of sweet, cold, chocolate nectar, trying to stretch out this momentary bliss for as long as we possibly could. So much for being perfect parents.

At that age, new tastes come at us in a flurry. Meal times can be quite messy as we experience these new sensations on our tongues. Strained peas get spit out, applesauce disappears in a hurry, mashed carrots go flying.

'Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted the Lord is good.'

When I read that line from today's passage, I couldn't help to remember the startling transformation that lit up my daughter's face when she first tasted that ice cream. In an instant, she moved from weeping to wonder, distress to joy, disgust to a thirst for more. Might there be a correlation between that eye-popping taste experience and that moment when God's love first grabs a hold of our hearts?

It is thought that the ones to whom this letter was first addressed were a newly formed community of faith. Their numbers were small and their community was young. They were just beginning to take their first, shaky, unsure steps of following this Jesus. They had tasted that the Lord is good and now they were smitten. They craved for more. It was all so wondrously new and exciting. But those first tastes, first experiences, first delights don't last forever. As much as we might try to stretch them out or even recreate them, it's just not possible. Firsts are usually followed by stark lessons of realism and growing pains.

From the delight of holding my daughter for the first time to the crying distress coming from the backseat despite our best efforts to bring her comfort.

From that first wondrous date to the stresses that life inflicts upon a married couple.

From a honey moon period to the challenges and even the ugly underside of a job we've settle into it.

From feverish hope to disappointment when it becomes apparent, after an election, that promises made are a lot easier said than kept.

From the wonderful new taste of hearing Christ call your name to the hard reality of discovering of what it means to follow him into the valley.

It's this place where the church, that Peter wrote to, found themselves. Quickly they had moved from wonder to the realization that following this beloved Jesus would demand much and not be easy.

Most likely these new followers of Christ were experiencing social ostracism and rejection in the communities where they lived. Maybe they were even enduring verbal abuse or worse from those around them due to this newfound faith they had embraced. It's hard to know, exactly, but it's safe to surmise that they felt like stones tossed aside in the process of building because they were deemed to be useless, defective, without worth. The community they had spent their entire lives in now looked upon them with ugly scorn, rejection, and disdain.

Peter's words come to these discouraged followers as a much-needed source of encouragement. Remember, he tells them, what happened to Jesus – rejected, tossed aside, deemed useless and defective just like you feel. Yet, look what God did! He made Jesus the critical cornerstone that holds this entire new structure of faith together. You are also like that. What others have deemed useless God has deemed essential. Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.

It's interesting to note that the instructions Peter gives are not that they should build the house but that they should let themselves, allow themselves to be built into a spiritual house. This building is God's doing. This first love that pulled them in the direction of God is God's doing. This new thing God is up to is God's doing. This sense that their new lives are somehow out of kilter with the culture around them is a result of what God is doing. Growing pains.

It is what happens after that first love draws us close to Jesus. It's a kind of love that challenges us and presses in on us to see and live differently. And, inevitably, as we move from that initial love to the deeper realities of what that love means things happen. It changes us just like most loves do.

I will never be the same person I once was before the birth of my children. I will never be the same person I once was before the call Christ made to me to come and follow. Love leads to growth and growth leads to change and change is often hard, demanding, and even lonely.

It had to be hard for that early church suffering rejection from their very own neighbors and friends. It can be hard for us in this time when following this Christ happens more on the fringes of society than at its center. What makes it even tougher, I have found, are the assumptions people tend to quickly make once they learn you are a lover of this Christ. Please, I beg them, do not lump me into all those popular stereotypes.

Be encouraged, Peter writes. While the world might toss you aside, it is this very pile of rejected stones that God uses to build his spiritual house. It is this very pile of rejected stones that God will use to instill new hope in a broken creation. It is this very pile of rejected stones that God will use to instill redemption in the lost and forgotten corners of the world. It is this very pile of rejected stones, us, that God has deemed a royal priesthood, God's own people. Never underestimate the power of a rejected stone when it is placed in the hands of God.

During interviews where people are asked to make an assessment of our nation's current state, the words people often use are: divided, stressed, tense, angry, partisan, uncompromising. It seems an accurate assessment as it is the kind of emotions I tend to run into in so many venues these days. There is a longing in us to find a way out of this, I think. A desire to end this divided and angry rift that has occurred but it is difficult to know where to begin or how to even stay faithful to our Christian convictions in these most trying of times.

Perhaps the most important thing we can do is heed Peter's instructions: to *let* ourselves be built into a spiritual house. To trust the builder, to study the builder's blue prints, to allow the builder to set us in the places where our unique shape and gifts best support the spiritual structure, and to be faithful, even when it's not easy, in the place where the builder has set us. Most of all, we mustn't forget who we are or what the builder is doing even during those times when we feel walked upon and forgotten. No matter what our surroundings might say or what our

enemies and friends might suggest or what our checkbook might indicate or what our status might imply or what our bosses or places of work might reduce us to, remember this: Once you were not a people, but NOW you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but NOW you have received mercy.

This is, after all, what made our eyes pop when we first fell in love with this Christ and this is the promise upon which God continues to build his spiritual home which stretches all the way into eternity.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, we are thankful for those first days when love called and we could not help but to respond. Those first days when your whisper made our hearts leap and our imaginations soar. Those first days when life felt brand new and we were eager to try out our new legs as we followed you.

We are also thankful, O Lord, for the spiritual food you have fed us along the way enabling us to grow even when the growing pains were hard to endure.

Shape us, O Lord, into the living stones that are needed in the building of your spiritual home. Chisel away those rough edges that need smoothing. Help us to share in your delight over the unique role we play in the building of your holy home. Move our hearts to give thanks for that which makes each living stone different yet no less essential.

We live in challenging times, O God, when it is often not easy to live out our love for you in the spots where you have placed us. When we are discouraged, remind us that we are your people. When we wonder if our efforts make any difference, remind us of the cornerstone, your Son, which was once rejected but has now become the critical cornerstone of the home you are building.

We pray this day, O God, for your living stones around the world doing their best to remain faithful. Give them courage, we ask, give them strength, give them encouragement, and help them to never forget the love with which you first called them and which continues to sustain them.

Gracious God, we remember the leaders of our nation and of nations around the world. May your love for them be made clear even as it reshapes them into being love that demands much.

We pray for those who are sick and discouraged, angry and violent, worn and afraid, frail and weak, lonely and hopeless. We pray especially for those who may feel like they have been tossed on the rubble heap...useless and of little worth. Grant all them eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to know that they have not been forgotten – they are your people. We especially ask you to now hear these prayers we are bold to pray in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.