

Make Us into a Sanctuary



A Meditation by Sidney D. Fowler based on
1 Peter 2:1-10 for
“Building & Blessing/Constuir y Bendecir:
A Celebration for Those Who Built Our New Church.”
July 15, 2012.
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington
DC

1 Peter 2:4-10

Come to Christ, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in that one
will not be put to shame.’

To you then who believe, that one is precious; but for those who do not believe,
‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner’, and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a
rock that makes them fall.’

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

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.

New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version

1. Introduction: “A Building Alive”

Go ahead. Take a minute. Look around.

For just a moment, deconstruct the construction that surrounds us.

Peel away the layers.
For example, what was required to create this stone wall and floor
beyond just this beautiful Portuguese limestone ?
Each stone was cut to fit and then mortared together.
Underneath and behind these stones are dry wall.
And underneath the dry wall is framing, wiring, HVAC, and in some cases acoustical springs.
Before the framing and wiring, there was the creation of construction drawings.
Engineering calculated how the stones would be placed to bear the weight.
There was choosing the stone. Don't forget pricing the stone.
There was also the journey of the stones themselves --quarried in Portugal -- hewn, and
readied for construction.
And still, first of all, there was the imagining of the architects and many of you
of what this room might look like.

All this is about the construction of only one aspect of this building.
How many hands have touched and worked each aspect of just this room,
of this entire building?
There are stories and lives that run deep in every inch of this place.
And so many of you here today – members, friends, guests -- are part of this story.
This place is a living building with living stones.

Now that is a rather disturbing thought – living stones and a living building.
Sounds like some B-rated horror or comedy movie
where walls talk or breathe
and grab a defenseless maiden or guy and sucks them into some other-worldly wall.
Yet, this building seems to have a life of its own.
Of course, some would say these quirky living building issues have been matters
for an ongoing punch list or getting the kinks out of the building now that we are in here.

Haven't you thought this building was alive?
There's the lights in here that went off and on in worship or
the amplified sound that jumped from silence to a boom and we couldn't figure it out.
The living building said: *"Let's make sure they are still awake."*
There's that elevator that decided on two of our early and larger worship services. Perhaps the
building was saying:
*"Let's pack the folks in here in this small space and then freeze between the floors. That'll
be a great chance for them to get to know each other. Talk about hospitality."*
And there are those front automatic doors that we reflected on before that refused to shut.
The building said:
*"You can't keep folk out. You gotta make good on your promised that no matter who
people are where they are on life's journey. They are welcome here."*
Then there is the acoustics here -- that are so fine – the acoustics that are so alive.
A flute played behind one of these stone walls sounds like its coming from all these walls.

The building seems to say:

*“Let’s fill this entire place with music, praise, and beauty.
Sing walls, sing!”*

These are living stones and this is a living building.

2. A Living Stone, A Living Building, A View from 1 Peter

The Bible also speaks of living stones and a living building.

In the peculiar passage from the book of First Peter,

those first ancient Christians were beat down and disoriented
by traumatic events.¹

The Roman Empire ruled the day and destroyed the historical Temple in Jerusalem

– a building that symbolized the hope, the mission, and the Jewish identity as God’s
people.

Without the temple, both Jews and Christians were thrown in a state of confusion.

They were spiritually homeless.

They were resident aliens in many ways – the outsiders.

Many were noncitizens, excluded from voting and holding office.

Many were day laborers without much hope of permanent work.

They were a suffering people.

So for that early community, when they heard the reading for today,
it was unexpected and startling.

The passage was an invitation to be God’s household for those without a home,
to be God’s temple for those without a sacred space.

They, who knew the power of a building to provide shelter, community, and hope,
they, who labored and some who had suffered,
now were invited to be people of comfort and healing.

Those Christians saw Jesus Christ as a Living Stone on which their lives were built.

His presence became home to them. He too had a hard time of it. He suffered.

Christ, the one who had no place to lay his head at night,

now was the foundation, the cornerstone of a place, a home of hope.

Yet this passage does not just talk only about Christ as the living stone,
but calls on us to be a community of “living stones” as well.

The preacher William Loader says,

*“The stone imagery invites us to see ourselves also as stones and then to see ourselves
together as not a random pile of rock or stones strewn across the landscape...but as stones
belonging to a structure built on Christ....The church is not the building in which we meet,
but the building we have become.”²*

We are to reflect the same values and hopes of Christ.

We will be a place of hospitality, a bold witness to justice,
a people and place of compassion, a home for the homeless,
a family for those without family.

3. Recognizing those Who Labored, Living Stones

Today's celebration recognizes you who labored on this building.

You have been and are living stones for us at First Church.

Whether you are of this faith, another faith or no faith, we are deeply grateful to you.
You offered your gifts, wisdom, skills, and physical strength to the building of this place.
We believe the Living God has worked through your work.

In one of our planning meetings for this service, Meg Maguire expressed a hope that
we want you to consider. Meg asked:

*"Do you know what you have done? You have done far more than keep the rain out.
You have created something of what we aspire to?"*

This place in the last 7 months, by the grace of God, has already become a Living Building.
Here, already, we baptized babies and celebrated new life.

Here, gathered around this table, we shared food and the presence of Christ.

Here, giant doors opened welcoming folks into a spiritual home and place of hope.

We greeted Christ in a manger here, extinguished candles during Holy Week, and
celebrated the Risen Christ at Easter.

Here, we grieved and celebrated the full and holy lives of those who have died.

Here, we celebrated the weddings of those who love one another –

several who could not legally get married within their own state and church.

Here, already in this place we hosted a Summit on Homelessness for DC,

congratulated youth from Shaw Community Ministries who are heading to college
against tough circumstances,

welcomed colleagues from Columbia,

and now enjoy talented, exuberant youth during this year's Fringe Festival.

On these walls, we exhibited art from children who are victims of war in Afghanistan and
panels of quilts that hold in holy memory those who died of AIDS.

Here we know the presence of God.

"Do you know what you have done? You have done far more than keep the rain out."

You, have been with us in each of these holy acts. You are living stones.

Your work is not only what was left behind on the day you finished at this job site.

Your work lives. Thank you. Gracias.

And now, may the work here matter to you in your future work everywhere.

May you continue to be a place of compassion, hope, and justice.

4. An Invitation to First Church – Friends, Guests, and Members

And good folk of First Church – friends, guests, and members –
let us learn from those who labored.

Let us be living stones.

We are blessed with this place.

Yet on this day, we pray:

“God, move this building <point to building> to this place <point to heart>.

*“May all that’s good and holy, beautiful and welcoming about this place,
come to this place within us.”*

A week ago, Isaiah Davis and Grant Anderson, two youth from our congregation,
went on a mission trip with Habitat for Humanity to help build two homes
in West Virginia.

I think they moved this building – and the labor that others did here –
from here <building> to here <heart>.

In the sweltering heat,
they joined other youth in laying the foundations of two homes
for those who would otherwise be homeless.

Isaiah told me that during the work they wore blue ribbons so
they wouldn’t forget why they were there and who they were building the house for.
He said they learned a bit about looking “past yourself “and to others.
We are proud of Grant and Isaiah. Ask them about the trip and what it meant to them.
Like the workers we celebrate today, Grant and Isaiah are teaching us to be Living Stones.

“God, now move this building to this place.

*May all that’s good and holy, beautiful and welcoming about this place, come to this place
within us.”*

Let us not forget. Wear a blue ribbon if you need to.

Here we are inspired and find hope – to live with inspiration and hope

Here we are welcome – to be a welcoming presence in the world.

Here we know beauty and the splendor of God – to see, to hear, and to work for the
splendor of God.

Here we experience God’s justice and peace – to be God’s justice among the vulnerable.

God, move this building to this place <point to heart>. O God, make us a sanctuary. Amen.

¹ See Jerry Truex, "God's Spiritual House: A Study of 1 Peter 2:4-6," *Direction*, Fall 2004. For more information, link to <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1355> .

² William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year A: Epistle Passages." Link to <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEaster5.htm>