

Sermon: Pentecost 12

The Rev. Mike Wernick

August 27, 2017

Year A
Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm 138
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

From 1Peter 2:4: *Come to him... a living stone... and like living stones... let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...*

I once lived in rural Iowa... and when we left the house... unless we were going out of town for more than the day... we never locked it... if we went out for a walk... or to the grocery store... or to a movie... we never locked the house... and there was a certain freedom... in feeling able to do that... a confident trust in our neighborhood itself... now... because of where we live... along 60th near Kalamazoo... and because of recent reports by the sheriff's office... we lock the house when we leave... buildings without locks... cannot be locked... and locks on doors are meant to keep people out... and when they are locked... you need keys to open them...

So what does it mean to build a church... Jesus told Simon Peter that on him... he would build the church... but he didn't mean that literally... he meant that the church would be built on the kind of rock-solid faith referred to... in the readings from Isaiah that Ann just read... and from 1Peter... that I just read... it would at least be built on the kind of faith that Peter had... the assurance... the confident trust he had... about who Jesus is...

When I attended the University of Florida... I helped build a kind of house... I was on the founding board of North Hall Co-op... a dormitory co-op which I and five other students established... I made friends with the Resident Assistant who lived in our building... and one day... out of the blue... Scott gave me a key... it was a special key... a sort of a master key... so when everyone else needed two keys to get into their

rooms... I could open both the outside door and my room door with it... but not only that... it unlocked every door in our building... and not only that... it was a Grand Master Key... a key that opened every lock... not only in our building... not only in those five dormitories in our area... but every lock... on every door... in every residential and storage and maintenance building on the west side of campus...

I don't know how Scott came to have one... no less make a copy for me... but it was the kind of key you did not tell others you had... it was like an idol... something you kept to yourself... took some private satisfaction from... it felt like having the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven... because I could loose all kinds of doors that no one else could...

And one day... some friends came to visit... and needed a place to sleep... so I used that key to provide welcome... I was able to open an empty room and provide beds on which they could sleep... instead of the floor... a Grand Master key that could provide welcome...

Did our Jewish Jesus want Simon Peter to unlock the Gates of Heaven and provide welcome for only Jews... I don't think so... Jesus told Nicodemus that one needed to be born of water and of Spirit... not necessarily to reject their old identity... but to add on a new one... and Jesus would have been familiar with the practice of *tevilah*... ritual bathing to remove ritual impurity... so the cleansed person could return to the ceremonial life of the community... and this was achieved by full immersion in a *mikveh*... a pool that contained at least 200 gallons of clear water... a form of baptism... if you will...

And interestingly... when I converted to Christianity... and was baptized... I wrote my parents... that my varied spiritual life... now included Christianity... that God is God... and my journey to know God more deeply... was concerned more with truth than with division... that I had not rejected my Jewish experience... because it is part of me... to

reject any of it would be to reject a part of myself... and that my goal was wholeness — not fragmentation...

But I still struggled getting out from under the distorted and heavy weight of Christian fundamentalism... the self-righteous exclusivity of... *we're right you're wrong*... had formed me... and as Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer... I think it's critical to make a place at the Table for all people...

So who's in... and who's out... can only Christians be members of the body of Christ... can one be re-born of water and of Spirit... and remain in the faith tradition of their birth... what about those who do God's will no matter what they call themselves... what we believe matters... but does it matter more than how we behave... does our label determine our behavior... or does our behavior determine our label...

And who's in... and who's out... in America... we know... painfully well from events over the last few weeks... and from much of what's been said about it... that there are still far too many... who want to live in the past... and lock doors... who want to restrict welcome... to Blacks... Jews... Hispanics... Muslims... gay... lesbian... and transgender folk... who make idols out of race... patriarchy... religion... flags... statues... this country... out of the way things were... and worship them... too many who think they can turn back time... but one of the few good reasons to look towards the past... is to recall the faith of Abraham... the rock from whom we were hewn...

Jesus asked his disciples... *Who do people say that the Son of Man is*... and they answered... *some say John the Baptist... or Elijah... or Jeremiah... or one of the prophets*... these people were looking backwards too... towards the past... but none of them named Abraham... then Jesus asked them... *Who do you say that I am*... and Simon Peter answered... *You are the Messiah... the Son of the living God*... Peter saw the unlocked... unplugged... radical possibilities that Jesus embodied... and an enlightened future that he offered... to everyone... as gift...

Pastor Erik Doughty wrote... in Matthew's Gospel... Jesus stands where no good Jew would go... near a town built to honor a Roman emperor... and near the Temple of the god Pan... built in a cave considered to be The Gates of Hades... with Peter's answer... we realize that neither Caesar nor Pan are worthy... the blessing and love of God in Christ Consciousness... means that God loves you in the places no good person... might go... and it also means... that when authoritarians exert their will... the will of God is at work... working liberation despite them...

So what does it mean to build a church... when I was installed as your Rector and Pastor... you gave me keys... you asked me to open doors to Truth... to you and to all who came knocking... but I'm not the only one who's been given keys... we've all been given the same keys... we've all been given Grand Master keys... we've been given keys that unlock every and any door... which restricts the movement of the Holy Spirit... and we're not meant to keep them to ourselves the way I did with that actual key... we forget sometimes... that God is Love... and while love knows no boundaries... it won't force its way into any locked heart... so let's unlock some hearts...

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