

May 10, 2020  
Year A  
1 Peter 2:2-10

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship

Just before I left Prince of Peace to come here to Emmanuel, Prince of Peace celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. I had worked with a group of people for more than a year to plan a year full of celebrations and events marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that congregation.

Just to name a few of the events that we had that year, we had a float in the town's Memorial Day parade. We had created a banner, and our choir director had written us a special "anniversary" Call to Worship to sing throughout the year. We had designed and sold a Prince of Peace Christmas ornament. We had speakers from the various time periods of the congregation talk about its mission and ministry over the years. We created and buried a time capsule, to be opened in 2064 at the church's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

That's just a sample of the things that we did. I know that I've forgotten some of the things that we did to celebrate, to remember, to look forward to the future.

The whole year culminated in a big celebration that was held on the second Sunday of November 2014. There was a celebratory worship service, followed by a luncheon and dance at a nearby event space.

We invited pastors from the church's past to come and be a part of the service. We invited lay people from the church's history who had moved away to come back and celebrate with us. Bishop Hazelwood came to preach. Our choirs, bell choirs and other musicians had worked hard for months getting special music ready for the big day.

When that day finally arrived, I could be found, early in the morning, in my driveway, picking up small stones, and putting them in a basket. I was getting them ready for my children's sermon.

Now, Prince of Peace is a relatively modern looking church building and when it was built, the emphasis was on natural materials. So, the sanctuary was made up mostly of wood and stone and roughhewn stained glass. The floor was stone, the beams were wood, the baptismal font was large, carved block of granite. In some ways, it could be said, that in that sanctuary an effort had been made to bring nature indoors.

I was “directing the liturgy” for the anniversary service, which meant that I had responsibility for guiding the Bishop, the visiting pastors, and the worship assistants to where they were supposed sit, what part of the liturgy they had responsibility for, and how they were supposed to line up for the procession at the beginning of the service.

It was a big day, one that I and many other people had spent at least a year planning. But finally, the moment came, the sanctuary was packed, the worship assistants, pastors, and Bishop were robed and lined up just where they were supposed to be, and the music of the processional began. And, finally, after a year of planning, and a week of intense preparation, I began to worship.

Leading the service was divided up between the various pastors who were there, so, once the service actually started, I only had two jobs, besides worshipping. One was to help distribute communion and the other was to offer the children’s sermon.

When the time for the children’s sermon came, I gathered the children around me, with my basket of stones. And then I asked them what the church was.

The kids were sitting on the floor in front of the chancel in a packed sanctuary, that held 250 people. There were chairs in the Narthex to provide seating for the people who didn’t fit into the sanctuary. There were pastors there, there was a bishop there, there were choirs and musicians there.

But when I asked kids what the church was, what made up the church, they looked around at the stone floor, at the high ceilings with its wooden beams, at the

big, stone baptismal font, at its rough-hewn stained-glass windows, and they started talking the building, about stone and wood and walls and windows.

I knew they would, of course they would. After all, that morning their parents had probably said to them some variation of, “Put on your shoes, it’s time to go to church.” And, then they had gotten in their cars and driven to a building.

One of the readings for that day was our second reading for today, from 1 Peter. It is the assigned reading every year for the fifth Sunday of Easter in year A. It is also one of the recommended readings for the anniversary of a congregation and we had chosen it for our anniversary celebration.

So, I asked them, if the building made of wood and stone and glass were empty would it still be the church? They looked at me like I was crazy. “Of course, it would be,” they said.

But then I told them about what the church was really made of. I told them that the church was made up, not of materials, wood, stone, paint, dry wall, pipes, tile, windows, glass, furniture. I told them that a church was not a building, but a people, living stones built together into a spiritual house for God, a spiritual community a group of disparate people brought together by the grace of God. Brought together to celebrate that grace, to share God’s love, and to serve others, by making sacrifices acceptable to God by using as their model for sacrifice, the teachings, the example, the nature, of Jesus Christ.

And then I gave each of those kids a stone, to remind them that they were a living stone in the house of God and that wherever they were, at school, on the playground, in their homes, at the movies, or in the church building, they were part of the community of faith, part of a holy priesthood, that they were God’s own people.

I told them that we were blessed to have a beautiful building to worship in, but I also told them that the congregation of Prince of Peace had existed before we had the building we were sitting in that morning. That Prince of Peace had been a

church when the charter members of the congregation had been meeting in each other's homes. That Prince of Peace had been a church when the growing congregation was gathering and worshiping in the cafeteria of Brookfield High School for almost two years, before it ever had a building of its own. That Prince of Peace had been a church when our first building was built and when we worshiped in our first sanctuary, what those kids knew as the fellowship hall and nursery school. That Prince of Peace had been a church when the sanctuary we were worshiping in that morning was built and dedicated.

I reminded them that what we were celebrating that morning was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a church but not the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a church building.

We were celebrating that in 1964 God had brought a people together, that God had said over them, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people, chosen and precious in God's sight, built together into a spiritual house to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ."

At the time, I was very comfortably cavalier about the building that I was worshiping in packed with hundreds of people. But back in those days and even back in February of this year, I know that I didn't take seriously enough the blessing it was to be able to gather in a building, the blessing of being able to breathe the same air as other people, of being able to touch each other, to shake each other's hand, to hug each other, to give each other a comforting squeeze of the shoulder.

I know I didn't appreciate enough the blessing that it was to be able to be face to face with my congregation as I preached, to be able to see people's reactions, to see if people laughed or cried or yawned or looked that their watches.

I know that I didn't appreciate enough the blessing of being able to sing together.

I know that I didn't appreciate enough the blessing of being able to commune together.

I know that I didn't appreciate enough just the blessing of being able to inhabit physical space together. whether it was in our church building, or in hospital rooms, or in homes, where I brought people communion.

Back then, I never could imagine a time when, as a church, we wouldn't have those things. Those things that make it infinitely simpler to be a community, to have those literal touchstones, that draw us together. A place for us to go, a building we can touch, a space we can inhabit, where we can be us.

There have been times in my career as a pastor when I have lamented the amount of time and money that most congregations spend maintaining a building.

Because my theology is good. My theology is sound. A church is not a building. It's not a lawn. It's not a flower garden. It's not a kitchen or bathrooms, or classrooms, or an event hall, or a parlor. It's not a steeple or even a sanctuary. But in my experience, a lot of church time and money and unity is spent discussing, debating, and maintaining those things.

A church is a people. A church is a community, called together, gathered by the Holy Spirit. I know this is true. I believe this is true, for my knowledge of church history tells me so, for my knowledge of the history of the congregations that I have been a part of tells me so, and even more importantly, for the Bible tells me so.

But, my friends, I miss our building even though I am sitting in it. I am grateful for the ways that it serves us, that it helps us, that it makes it easier for us to live our communal life, that it helps us to serve our neighbors, that it makes it easier for us to live in the communion and community that God has called us to.

But as I'm sitting in it alone, it doesn't feel like the church. It feels like an empty building. It feels lonely.

And you know what does feel like the church? What I'm looking at on my screen. All of you. The living stones of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Members and friends, built, amazingly enough, as you sit in your homes in different towns and even different states, into a spiritual house, literally making sacrifices acceptable

God. Sacrificing the convenience, the balm, the joy, the comfort of gathering, for the sake of the wellbeing of each other and the wellbeing of strangers.

It feels like the church when I see you, even through a screen, for worship, for prayer, for Friday Night Live, for Confirmation check-ins, for meetings.

It feels like the church when I talk to you on the phone.

It feels like the church when I hear about the ways that you're reaching out to each other, checking in with each other, sending notes, making calls, remembering each other in prayer.

I have always looked forward to Sundays, even before I was a pastor, as the center of my week, a day when I would experience connection with God and with my community in a unique way. And that continues even during this time of separation.

In fact, maybe even more, right now. Because, when your names and faces start popping up on Zoom literally a screen full of the building blocks of our community, the living stones, built into a spiritual building, my heart feels full.

The first Sunday that we did this when those first names and faces started popping up on my screen, I actually cried, tears running down my face, because I realized that we were going to be able to do this, we were going to be able to worship together, we were going to be able to be the people that God has called us to be, together.

Of course, I am looking forward, with perhaps even more appreciation than I have ever had before, to the day when we can be together in our building again, when we can inhabit the same space again. Know that the leaders of Emmanuel and I are working very hard to try to figure out when that might be and what that might look like, so that we can be safe, so that our gathering can be one of joy and life, not danger and fear.

But in the meantime, and even after we can be together again, remember,

that what I told those kids at Prince of Peace almost 6 years ago was true then, is true now, and has been true since before the author of 1 Peter wrote them down almost 2000 years ago.

We are living stones, a community called and gathered into one by God, recipients of God's mercy, and made holy by God's grace, so that in every incarnation of our life together, whether we share the same physical space, or whether we are physically, though never spiritually distanced, we can serve each other, serve our neighbors, and proclaim the mighty acts of God, who has called us out of darkness and into God's marvelous light.

Thanks be to God. Amen.