

BUILDING BLOCKS

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 14:8-12
1 Peter 2:4-10

May 18, 2025

Building blocks are one of the classic toys of childhood. Who doesn't remember building houses or towers or castles with blocks only to have a toddler knock them down? I remember my children bursting with anticipation and hardly able to wait for me to complete a block structure so that they could destroy it. My grandchildren have also been enthusiastic little destroyers over these past several years.

However, eventually, kids move into elementary school and as they do they seem to move away from destruction mode and into more of a building and preserving mode. I remember Ethan working for longer periods of time and with great focus and determination as he built big, elaborate structures. He would use every shape and size block we had and even other items to build his structures. Eventually, he moved into building even more intricate structures with Legos. At that point, he did not want to destroy or have anyone else destroy his beautiful creations; he wanted to play with them and show them off to anyone and everyone who would come and see them. In fact, taking his creations apart because eventually clean-up needed to happen was not a gleeful experience but rather a sad one for him.

Can you imagine at any age giving a child only one block or one Lego and telling that child to go build something? The idea is ridiculous. It makes no sense to pair the singular word "block" with the word "build." Certainly, the first block is an important starting point, but additional blocks are absolutely needed if one is to imagine and build anything. Whether one chooses to use blocks, bricks, stones, wood, popsicle sticks or some other medium, building happens only with the availability of multiple pieces.

Today, in our Epistle lesson, Peter talks about a very important, in fact, essential building stone, it's a single stone that is described as a cornerstone. Peter says, **"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."** (1 Peter 2:6) When saying this, Peter was thinking of verse 22 of Psalm 118 which says, **"The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."** Because we, like Peter, are living on this side of the resurrection, we like him know that Jesus Christ is that chosen, precious yet rejected cornerstone.

A cornerstone is a foundationally significant stone which something is based. Jesus, the One who is central to our faith, who by his birth, life, death and resurrection established our faith, is the essential first stone upon which any Christian structure or ministry is built. But no matter how significant that one great stone, the building of anything for the purpose of fulfilling God's purposes as revealed in Jesus Christ, needs additional stones, in fact, many, many stones.

A block, brick, stone that lies somewhere all by itself is mostly useless; it becomes useful and impactful only when it is incorporated into a larger structure.

So, ***"Come to him, 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..." (1 Peter 2:4-5)*** If you didn't hear that word "spiritual" let me emphasize it, we are to let ourselves be built into a "spiritual house" – this structure that Peter is talking about is not a physical one but a spiritual one. The Apostle Peter is not thinking about the many stones, bricks and blocks needed to construct a physical church building, he is instead thinking about the many Christians, the many individuals who together make up a community of faith, the church of Jesus Christ. Peter is referring to those who are called by Christ, who are held together by a common Spirit, built up to fulfill a common purpose, and who are then sent out to fulfill that purpose in Christ's name.

As individual Christians our place is found when we are one of the many stones that together become the spiritual structure that is the Body of Christ. It is a structure that cannot be destroyed by tornado, hurricane, flood, fire or earthquake. As a spiritual structure, the church is indestructible as long as Christ is the cornerstone and the faithful are present and committed to building it up by doing what Jesus did. In fact, Jesus told his disciples that the spiritual structure of the church will be so strong and impactful that even ***"the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."*** (Matthew 16:18)

Peter's point is that Christians are meant to be a community, because it is not possible to remain alone and to realize our strength and potential within the will of God. We must each find our place within the structure or fabric of Christ's Church. Individual Christians who think they don't need anyone else are living in denial – fooling themselves. Individualistic Christianity is a contradiction in terms and simply not scriptural. There are numerous examples in the New Testament that reveal the importance, strength, support and impact of community. But let's look to our cornerstone, Jesus. If anyone had the ability, the power to go it alone, it was Jesus, but instead he was very deliberate about gathering a community of disciples. And he was very deliberate about telling his disciples to make more disciples, and to establish communities of Christ followers throughout the world (Mt. 28:19-20).

In November of 1994, a couple boarded an airplane and headed for Orlando. They were going to Disney World. Theresa was almost seven months pregnant. Thirty minutes into the flight, Theresa doubled over in pain and began bleeding. Flight attendants announced that they needed a doctor, and a Long Island internist volunteered. Theresa soon gave birth to a boy. But the baby was in trouble. Not only was he premature, the umbilical cord had been wrapped tightly around his neck and he wasn't breathing. Two paramedics rushed forward to help, one of whom happened to specialize in infant emergency procedures. He asked if anyone had a straw, which he wanted to use to suction fluid from the baby's lungs. The plane did not stock straws. But a flight attendant remembered having a straw left over from a juice box she had brought on board the plane. The paramedic inserted the straw in the baby's lungs as the internist

administered CPR. The internist asked for something he could use to tie off the umbilical cord. A passenger offered a shoelace. About four minutes of tension and fear passed before the little baby whimpered. Soon the crew was able to joyfully announce that it was a boy, and everyone on board cheered and clapped. In those critical moments, it took multiple people, giving what they had and doing what they could, so that the needs of both mother and baby could be met.

This is similar to the picture Peter paints of the church. As individual members of the Body of Christ, we encourage and support one another. We each do our part and as all our efforts are combined the love of God is successfully proclaimed and revealed to a hurting and hope-starved world. The church came into existence because God willed it and initiated it by sending his Son into the world. It continues because God empowers and compels it, us, with the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew what the church could be and do, and that individuals of faith could be built into an immensely impactful spiritual structure, and so he said to his disciples shortly before his death, ***"The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."*** (John 14:12)

God's purposeful and powerful design to effect hope and change in the world looks like individuals of faith, bound together and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and committed to the greater works of following Jesus' example. It looks like those of us here in this church and so many other churches who are giving and doing what Jesus has called us to give and to do as a community of faith. Together, we are meant to affect the kind of change that happens only as individual stones like ourselves are built upon the foundational cornerstone of God's love revealed in Jesus.

Peter continues his description of what it looks like to be built into a spiritual house by saying that we as a faith community are ***"to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."*** (1 Peter 2:5) It's true that I am your pastor, but according to this passage I am not the only pastor or priest within this community of faith. And that's because when the Spirit of Christ is at work within each one of us, and together we are linked as a community, then together, we also become a holy priesthood of believers and doers.

Now, if you are feeling uncertain about this title for yourself, let me clarify how the Bible describes a priest. Scripturally, there are basically two main characteristics that define a priest. **First of all, priests are those who have access to God and whose task it is to connect other people to God.** Jesus Christ not only made it very clear that each one of us has direct access to God, but he also made it clear that we each are responsible for recruiting more disciples. So, like a priest, we each have a duty, of course, it is also a privilege to introduce others to the Savior we personally know. **Secondly, priests are those who present the offerings to God.** As Christians we believe that we are each to bring our sacrifices before God. Our worship, our work, our tithes, everything we do, even the smallest of tasks, all our sacrifices, big and small, comprise our offering to God.

So biblically, the two tasks most closely associated with a priest are connecting others to God and presenting offerings to God. You may prefer to think that you don't have to embrace such a role because you are paying me to take care of such things. But through Christ, you, each one of you according to Peter are called and empowered to be a priest. When each one of us takes our priesthood role seriously and our efforts are united into God's bigger picture purpose then we become the "priesthood of all believers," a community of Jesus followers with significant potential.

Those who are claimed and named by Christ are the living stones upon which our Lord and Savior builds His church. Living stones cannot by definition be solitary, lifeless and ordinary because Christ calls us to be and do more. Whereas "ordinary" may be what many of us use to describe ourselves, I think we sometimes hide behind the word "ordinary." It can become an excuse for being less than we are meant to be, less than we are called by Christ to be. Clearly, we are each far from perfect, and that's not hard to admit and for others to see most days. But in Christ we are called and through the Holy Spirit we are empowered to be extraordinary in small ways and big ways, in very visible ways as well as more hidden ways.

It could be that the extraordinary role Christ is calling you to is "behind the scenes," because that's where your gifts lie. Christ calls you to excel in his name, because those "behind the scenes" roles are very important. Without you, this church cannot do everything Christ is calling us to do. Of course, there are those of you who are called to excel in more visible, out front, leadership ways. I know this because God always provides the leadership necessary for God's purposes to be fulfilled. Without you, this community of faith cannot do everything Christ is calling us to do.

If we could ALL start believing that we are both special and essential to God's purposes, then perhaps we would ALL start acting like God's building blocks by both living and proclaiming, **"the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)** You are meant to be a living stone, built into a living structure for the dynamic purpose of transforming the landscape of this world. You do this with the help of those sitting beside you, behind you and in front of you in these church pews. Together, and it only works well when we do it together, we radiate the light of Christ into this community and beyond. We, through what we say and do, make sure that God's heavenly kingdom of love is revealed on earth. You, not some of you but every one of you, are an essential building block in God's plan of salvation for the world. Believe it and live it! Amen.