

## “Building a Spiritual House”

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Text: 1 Peter 2: 4 - 12

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Have you ever travelled to a foreign land where you didn't know the language (or even understand their alphabet), where the culture was different from your homeland, where they have a different history, different foods, where the pace of life is different, where the concerns are different than back home? If you make such a journey, you feel out of place. You feel like you really don't belong. You feel like a stranger in a strange land. When Peter wrote this letter to Christians of the Roman Empire living in Turkey, he called them aliens and exiles. Now that seems odd, as the Christians in that place had not travelled there. They would have grown up there – and would know the language, culture, foods, history, concerns. They were native to the land. But something for them had changed. They were now Christians. According to Peter, that made them now foreigners, made them now aliens, made them now strangers in their own land. As I read Peter's first letter, the sense I get is that Peter's audience got that, felt that. But I think for us as Christians in our own culture this thought is harder for us to appreciate. If you are an Amish Mennonite living in Waterloo County you really get it. But I think for most Canadian Christians we don't. Certainly Peter got it. Tradition holds that Peter wrote this letter while being held captive in Rome, awaiting his execution, simply because he was a Christian.

Why we as Christians are different is not primarily because of what we believe... nor is it primarily because of how we live. It is primarily because of what God has made us. In this passage Peter drives home the point that we have been made into a new kind of people by the actions of God. Peter used a string of images to illustrate this. I'm going to work through that string twice. The first time, listen to how Peter describes us repeatedly as a group set apart from others. He called us “a **chosen** race” (we have been drawn by God into faith), a “royal **priesthood**” (priests are set apart from others in the faith community), a “holy **nation**” (nations are distinct from each other), “God's own **people**” (our relationship with God is different than others). All four references point to Christians being distinct. Now, hear these descriptors again, and listen to the *qualities* that make us distinct. Peter calls us “priests”, “holy”, “royal”, “God's own”, “chosen”. This is a description of how God views us... how God has made us different. The Greek word for church is “ecclesia” which literally means “called out”. We are the people called out of our societies to be a distinct society as God's people.

Now even if we are “called out”, we still may not feel like aliens and exiles. I think this is the case for two reasons. First, the heritage of Canada is Christendom. People my age and older remember starting the school day with a Scripture reading and the Lord's Prayer... remember church ministers taking part in civic events. In my home town there were three large churches, stretched along two blocks, all originally Presbyterian, with a total seating capacity for over 2,000. Within two blocks! Gives you an idea of how many people went to church! For the older generations today we grew up Christian in what we believed to be a Christian land. So it can be hard for us older Christians to think of ourselves as aliens and exiles in our own land.

But I think the other reason we don't feel like aliens and exiles is because we don't appreciate that God **has** made us different from those around us... that God sees us differently from those around us. Last week we looked at what Peter had to say about us as individuals: that we are holy. That God sees us as holy...set apart for God. In this passage Peter says that together we are a “holy nation.” When we consider deeply what God has given to us by God's grace, and appreciate it more and more, the more we will feel grateful to God for what we've received, the more we will feel different, the more we will want to honour the giver through our very lives. As we explored last week, as individuals we are called to a life of holiness. Now here Peter takes the next logical step: as a group—the

church—we are called to express holiness together. He wrote, “like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”

But the key bit behind all this is our purpose as the ecclesia...the called out ones... the church. Peter gives a reason for us being this chosen people. Verse 9 says, “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 him who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.*” We are called out to give witness to God through what we say. But not just that alone. In verse 12 we read, “Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles...that they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God.” We are called out to give witness to God through what we say. This is the mandate of the church: to point others to God through what we say and do. As I frequently say, we are the evidence for the existence of God. Peter is saying here: this is what we have been called out to be.

So how do we do that? Here are a few stories. A few years ago I was at Centennial Presbyterian Church in NE Calgary for worship. Before the service began, I turned around and said hello to the three black women behind me. We started to chat. I asked them how long they had been attending Centennial. The three women said in turn: “2 years”, “6 months”, “6 weeks”. So I questioned them further. All three were immigrants from different countries in Africa. When they arrived here they did not know a soul. The first woman who came to Centennial first became a friend to another—a friendship that was greatly appreciated by the newcomer. That new friendship eventually led to the new immigrant joining the first woman for worship at Centennial. That newcomer in time befriended another recent arrival to Canada, who appreciated the friendship offered to her. In time she too started to worship at Centennial. By the time I met them these three women were great friends together. Expressing Christian love through the offer of friendship drew people to church.

Back when I was at St. Andrew’s, one day a woman (I will call her Jean) walked into church. She said to me, “I drive by this church every day. Today I just felt that I had to come in and learn about you. I am not a Christian. I don’t know much about Christians. But I feel a strong need to be here and find out.” She started out with our Alpha program, run by congregants. She moved on to a Bible study group, run by congregants. In time she got involved in a congregational committee. Then she wanted to be involved in pastoral care. Today she is an elder. Jean was not a Christian when she began this journey. But by becoming involved in the life of that church she was influenced by the many Christians who make up that church. Today she has a deep and active faith.

In 2014 the Presbyterian Church in Paris Ontario wanted to start a ministry that could create jobs for those who receive assistance from the Ontario Disability Support Program. The congregation wanted to help persons with physical, developmental or mental health issues to find work, find something meaningful to do, and develop friendships among those they worked with. The congregation started a small company called “Raw Carrot.” Using the church kitchen 3 times per week the little group began making soups, with names such as Flying Noodle, Veggie Mania, Loaded Potato and Bacon, and, of course, Raw Carrot. Success has led to expansion to 4 locations now in different towns in southern Ontario, employing a total of 25 part time persons. Two more locations in other towns are in the works. The packaging for the soup asks a question in large type: “Can one bowl of soup help change the world?” Indeed it can, and does. The motto for the Raw Carrot company is “Peeling for Change.”

Three very, very different stories, to be sure, but all three stories—at their core—share one point in common. I would call these congregations missional churches, who give witness to God through their words and deeds. They do so by expressing care—care to those who are a part of the congregation, or new to their congregation, as well as care to those beyond the congregation. The missional church is about expressing the love of God visibly, through word and deed, in a way that helps people glimpse God.

Peter wrote to those churches, saying, "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" (vs. 10). Mercy: an act of kindness, compassion or favour. We have been benefactors of God's mercy, which is one of the big messages of Easter. We have received that blessing of mercy, through the acts of God and through the expressions of love by God's people. Gifts of love that we have received. This is what has drawn us to be a part of this chosen race, this royal priesthood, this holy nation, to be part of God's own people. Mercy. So now we are called to be God's ambassadors of grace, being people of mercy in a world that needs care. As we do that together...as the church...in Christ's name and service, we become that witness to the one we serve.

So let us together respond to Peter's invitation: for each of us to be like living stones, being built one upon the other as this spiritual house we call Varsity Acres Presbyterian Church. And as recipients of God's mercy, may we be people of mercy to one another, within our congregation and beyond.