

**HOW TO HANDLE SUFFERING:
BY BELONGING**

I Peter 2:2-10

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When I was out three years ago trying to raise eleven million dollars for building expansion and renovations, a member of this congregation gave me a brick. She didn't throw it at me even though she might have felt like it. She discreetly handed it to me after a meeting saying, "As we forge into the future let us not forget the past." You see, the brick came out of our old building on Church Street and she had kept it all of these years. I don't plan to keep it. I plan to put it in the archives being established in the new building.

Today's scripture is all about stones - cornerstones, stumbling stones, living stones, precious stones. Peter, whom Jesus nicknamed Rocky, was comfortable describing Christ as a cornerstone, and a community of faith as living stones. From that analogy I want to build a concept of community for our thinking today. We need to belong. We need to belong to Christ. We need to belong to one another.

WE BELONG TO GOD THROUGH CHRIST, THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE.

The Bible is full of references to God as a rock. Confirmation kids learn that as part of the names of God that we teach them. Deuteronomy 32:4 says, "*God is the rock, his works are perfect and all his ways are just.*" When Hannah prayed for a child in I Samuel she said, "*There is no rock like our God.*" The psalmist in Psalm 28 said, "*To you I call, O Lord my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me.*" Psalm 18 says, "*The Lord is my rock, my fortress in whom I take refuge.*"

And so, it is all over the liturgy of the Church, the phrases that we use in the community of faith -- God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. He is the Anchor that keeps the soul, steadfast and sure while the billows roll. The Lord is the Rock of our Salvation. His banner over us is love.

Taking that image, Peter offers an invitation. Did you get it in the Scripture reading? The invitation is this: *Come to him, the living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him.* Come to the Living Stone.

You who are broken, come. After all, God uses broken things. He uses broken soil to produce a crop, He uses broken clouds to give rain, He uses broken grain to give bread, and He uses broken bread to give strength. Peter, of all the disciples, surely understood that. He knows how strong you can become in the broken places of your life. After all, when Jesus came to repair his denial and to put him together again following his resurrection, Peter found his greatest strength at the places where he had his greatest problems. You, who are broken, come to the Living Stone.

You who are wounded, come. It is one thing to feel loved by God when our life is together and all our support systems are in place. Then self-acceptance is relatively easy and life is relatively good. But what happens when life falls through the cracks, when we sin and fail, when our dreams are shattered, when our investments crash, when we are regarded with suspicion, when illness and grief come stalking into our daily lives? What happens when we come face to face with the human condition? And Peter says to these struggling Christians in Asia Minor who are undergoing persecution, even in times like that, come to the Living Stone; come to the Stone. You who are wounded, come.

You who are needy, come. We send mission teams to third world countries and every time they come back with similar stories. They find these congregations in third world countries to be far more alive and spiritually alert than their counterparts in the United States. One African bishop explained it this way: "You don't need God in your country. By contrast, churches under daily persecution turn to their faith because they have no place else to go." Of course they are right. You, who are needy, come.

Or as I like to say, "We cannot know that God is all we need until God is all we have." Of this I am absolutely certain. When you touch the bottom, the bottom is sound. Jesus is a Rock in a weary land, a Shelter in the time of storm.

Then Peter gets even more specific. Not any old rock will do. Christ is the Chief Cornerstone in this text. Using this building analogy we put it to life. Christ is the Chief Cornerstone. "The stone that the builders rejected became the very head corner" (Verse 7). We take our cues and align our lives and set our priorities according to the ways of Christ who has gone before us on the journey. That is true not only in our good times and our times of brilliant faith but it is also true in our weak times, in our difficult moments, when it is hard and the suffering is real.

Remember that Christ endured suffering. As the creed says, He "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Isaiah, looking through the eyes of prophesy said, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering." If Christ suffered, why should we expect to be exempt from suffering? The real question is not why do bad things happen to good people? I'm sorry but that's not the question. The question is why do good things happen to bad people? That's the real question in life. That I should have cancer is no cause to question. The question is, how do so many of you get off the hook? To endure suffering is to be a part of life. Life has an 'if' right in the middle of it. We ought not to be surprised when it lands on our table and comes to our lives. It's an illusion to think otherwise. Christ endured suffering. Shall not we likewise endure?

Christ redeemed suffering. He was no joyful martyr. He didn't enjoy a single moment of it. He sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane. He cried out in human pain from the cross. He healed many people as He traveled from village to village in His earthly ministry. He was forever looking out, trying to heal the hurts of human beings around Him. He was no joyful martyr, our Christ. He came to make the world whole. At last He took up the cross, that emblem of suffering and shame and transformed it into

something to which we can cling until we exchange it someday for a crown. Christ redeemed our suffering.

There's one more thing about this Christ; He shares our suffering. Remember His last words to the disciples in Matthew's gospel before His ascension? *"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* You can take that promise and live by it. *Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*

Now I ask you today, in our transient, iffy world, what is always? Life is not always. Peter just said earlier in this passage: *All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall. Spring is beautiful- but spring is brief.* It blooms today and is gone tomorrow. Life is not always. It has an 'if' right in the middle of it.

Week after week I listen to couples pledge their allegiance to each other until they are parted by death. Both you and I know that marriages are not always forever. I will never forget a middle-aged woman sitting in a small group years ago in a church I pastored. We were sharing our stories and when we came to her she said, "I thought I was happily married, but when I was diagnosed with cancer I was put in the hospital. It was just too much for my husband; he just checked out. He brought a new robe and house slippers to the hospital and said, 'I'm sorry, I can't take this.' I never saw him again." Marriage is not always forever.

So I ask you, what is always? And I have but one answer to that question, one simple answer. Jesus is Always. He is always there. Days may not be fair, always, but that's when He is there, always. Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but always. Come to Him, the Chief Cornerstone, by which you can build a life.

WE BELONG TO ONE ANOTHER IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF WEAKNESS

We need to belong, we need to belong to God, and then we need to belong to each other. Verses 9 and 10 -- *You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wondrous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

People are connected to one another. In the Christian community we are primarily connected through the means of prayer. There is a quote from Henri Nouwen in your bulletin. I share it with you today. "To pray for one another is first of all to acknowledge, in the presence of God, that we belong to each other as children of the same God." To pray for others means to tear down countless walls that we have erected between ourselves and others. It is to turn from competition to community.

Seldom a day goes by but what somebody says to me "Is there something we can do for you?" I always answer the same way because the answer is always the same. "Absolutely. Yes, there is something you can do for me and countless others who share my predicament. You can pray." Prayer is not magic. It may not cure all our cancers, or make us successful, or even cause all our children to grow up into perfection. Prayer

may change us more than it changes things. Prayer does create a bond between us and the human race. Prayer is communion in the fellowship of Christ. Prayer binds us together with Christ in one heart and one mind, the power of which has never yet been told.

This is the image that Peter is using here in this text today. *You are a royal priesthood*, says Peter. It was the role of the priest in the Old Testament to pray on behalf of the people, to stand between God and people and link them together. Now Peter is taking it out of the specialized, credentialed group of people and handing it to all the saints. *You are a royal priesthood*. It was the task of the priest in the Old Testament to represent the people before the throne of God. Priests were bridge-builders, mediators, persons close enough to God to hear him and recognize his voice, but not so far away from people as not to hear them, and listen to their concerns by the countless thousands and sometimes, more importantly, for us the one and the two.

We belong to one another in the bonds of prayer. We belong to one another in the community of faith. When it's tough the last thing you want to do is to check out of the community of faith. I know it's tempting, isn't it? When people are hurting they sometimes drop by the wayside. But that is the absolute last thing we want to do.

Henri Nouwen says it so well. "So much of our pain remains hidden even from our closest friends." How often do you go up to someone and say I'm anxious, I'm needy, I'm angry, I'm bitter. I need your help." There is vulnerability in that confession that makes us fragile. So, as self-reliant people, we would rather do it ourselves, tough it out on our own. We are foolish for trying. Why is it so hard to ask for help? Why is it so difficult to depend on others? I think there are a couple of answers to that question.

In the first place, we don't want to bother people. We are built on the notion that we are self-reliant. We are tricked into believing we can handle things ourselves if we just try a little harder. We believe that our problems are not as bad as they may seem and we believe that isolation is safer than community. So we tough it out alone and I say to you again today, don't do that. You'll increase your suffering when you do.

Another reason we don't share our burdens with other people is that we don't trust other people very much. The world is full of fix-it people. As problem solvers we assume that every problem has a solution. Suffering is a problem. Let's get the problem solved, let's get the difficulty worked out. There must be a solution close at hand. The result is often that we quickly find ourselves pointing a finger at the one who suffers. I've got news for you. Most of us, even those who are hurting deeply, don't need to be fixed. What we need is friendship, somebody to care.

A friend is someone who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness. That is a friend who cares.

We belong to Christ,

We belong to each other,
Blest be the ties that bind us together.

Amen.