

*“Building the Church with Living Stones”* Based on 1 Peter 2:1-15, Acts 7:54-8:1

Delivered on Sunday, May 10, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

During this quarantine period, I have been overwhelmed by just how competitive my kids are. For these 2 and 4-year-old humans, everything is a race, and everything is on their terms. At every meal, Claire or I ask, “Who wants to pray?” And they fight over it. It used to be pulling teeth to get Harrison to pray, until Jo started in, *“Thank you, Jesus, for this food, bless it to our bodies. AMEN!”* So, now Harrison demands to be granted the right to pray first, or else he’ll pout, and sometimes not participate. After eating, when it is time to wash their hands, he races to beat his sister to the sink.

With two kids, you kind of expect sibling rivalry, but my son takes it to some interesting levels. We had bought a portable soccer goal a while back and finally now set it up. Harrison has become pretty good at executing a little give-and-go move, where he kicks me the ball, and starts running toward the goal, I pass it back and then, on the run, he kicks it into the net. The joy in his face as that ball hits that twine is wonderful, but the sadness in his face if I accidentally or intentionally kick it into the net, well, that is extremely frustrating.

Now, I realize he’s only four and I don’t really even want him to be a professional athlete, but I can’t get him to grasp the idea of being on a team, being part of something bigger, and being ok with not being the star, or being ok with not being the one to score every goal. He says he is upset because he wants to be a ‘winner.’ These are his words. Now, as a Mets, Jets and Nets fan, I am used to not being a winner, but, still, I am competitive, and so I see myself in him.

Now, I’d like to be able to blame it on something or someone else, maybe movies or TV. But again, we have tried to limit what he watches to shows that model good values. He has loved toy cars and anything with wheels from the beginning, so a friend got us Disney Pixar movie “Cars” when Jo was born. This is a movie about car racing, but it teaches good sportsmanship.

In it, Lightning McQueen starts out all about winning, he’s cocky and brash. But he is humbled after getting stranded in a small town, being forced, in a sense, to get to know other cars, to learn what really matters – loving others. So, after Lightning learns this lesson, he goes to the biggest race of his career. It’s a 3-way race for the Piston Cup Championship with a legend named King, for whom this will be his last race, and a villain named Chick Hicks, who has no problem cheating to win.

After a few exciting twists and turns, Lightning is about to win the race, but, spoiler alert, he stops at the finish line and lets Chick pass him. You see, after Lightning took the lead, Chick bumped the King, sending the older car into a race-ending tailspin. So, Lightning stops and goes back to help King. He pushes King all the way to the finish, saying, “I think the King should finish his last race,” and calling the championship trophy, “just an empty cup.”

This is the type of sportsmanship I want my son to value, where humility and sacrifice come first, where the needs of others are more valuable than winning or getting a trophy. This is what God modeled for us in Jesus, by sharing in our life as a human being, being emptied of power so as not to exploit, but serve us in our humanity, even to the point of giving up His life by dying on a Roman cross. God did not defeat sin and death on sin and death’s terms. No, on their terms, it looks like they’ve won – Jesus died. But God sacrificed all that the world values most, in order to redeem us from our false gods, rising again to reveal sin and death’s defeat.

This is what we hold up as “good news” in our faith – that God became human in Jesus, died for us and rose again. Yes, Jesus establishes a kingdom, a reign, for Himself, where the servant is the winner. You see, in the Kingdom of God, our worldly power, our wealth or our popularity, are not what make us winners but actually, it’s quite the opposite. No, the true power in this Kingdom comes from serving others, from love for the poor and outcast, even love for our enemies.

That is the empowering message of the cross and resurrection for us today, that in Christ, we are free to do what’s right, because the world can do its worst to us, yet it doesn’t matter because we will stand again and resurrect in real power with Christ. This is not a death-wish, that we should long to be a martyr like Stephen or seek out suffering. No, rather it is an empowerment to rise above the values of this world for God’s sake. The cross and resurrection empower us through the Holy Spirit, to stop seeking victory on the world’s terms by vanquishing enemies, but instead find our value being a living stone in the reign of God, to build up a church around that stone the world rejected, the cornerstone that was crucified and rose again.

As living stones in this church, we are not called to use the world’s powers against it, or to build up worldly power and unleash it against those who hold the power now. This is not why Peter says Jesus has made us part of a chosen family (*or tribe*). It is not why we are called part of a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and it is not why God has claimed possession of us.

No, Peter says we are called to abstain from worldly desires, because these wage war against our souls, our true lives. Peter says to keep up our good conduct among the pagans or the gentiles, the nonbelievers. This is so that when they speak out against us, they will not see us reflecting worldly values, but will observe us as different doing deeds that will cause them to praise God. It is our behavior, doing right, that will silence the foolishness around us.

I believe we see a part of this in the Acts passage today as Saul witnesses Stephen’s stoning. The Saul mentioned here is a student of one of the top Rabbis of that day, Gamaliel. He is like an Ivy League Ph.D. student being groomed by Gamaliel for leadership, and yet, he is going against his teacher’s guidance to leave Christians alone. Where Gamaliel said not to kill the Christians, Paul is aiding and abetting the murder of Stephen by vigilantes. He witnesses Stephen, who is himself a leader in training capable of signs and wonders, acting like Jesus, the One to whom he commits his spirit, by asking Jesus to forgive his murderers.

Now, this Saul of Tarsus will eventually encounter the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Yes, this is the Saul, who will later be known to the Gentiles as the Apostle Paul. Saul loved the God of Israel, but chose the ways of the world to defend his God, and as we know, Jesus asked him, “*Why are you persecuting me?*” God identifies with us as living stones of the church, because the God of Israel chose to be one of those stones, the cornerstone that Saul, like the world, had rejected. This Saul approved of Stephen’s death, but later, Paul would repent of it and die for Christ.

By the world’s standards, Stephen, like Jesus, did not win that day when he was killed. Stephen did not take up arms, nor did the Christians who grieved his loss that night. Instead, that moment likely haunted the young Saul until Jesus confronted him. Again, the point here is not to go out and get killed in a city street, but the reality here is that God takes defeat as we see it, and turns it into victory, in ways we would not expect.

This Saul does find Christ and goes on to spread the gospel throughout the empire, planting churches. He also advises and teaches churches and pastors with letters that become scripture and continue to move hearts today, bringing people to find the risen Christ and become living stones also.

Unfortunately, Harrison can watch Lightning McQueen be celebrated for his love, but still say he wants to be like Chick Hicks because Chick Hicks won the race. And more unfortunately, we in the church can look at the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross, and see the witness of the martyrs that formed the early church, and still succumb to seeking worldly power to do God's will.

In these uncertain times, we must remember the Kingdom we serve is Christ's Kingdom. It's really hard to not be meeting with you all, but we must do all we can to preserve life. The government doesn't dictate the church, but how we respond says a lot. It says a lot to the non-believing world about our integrity and our calling. For, if we are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, our purpose is to announce the excellent deeds of Jesus Christ, who called us out of our darkness into His light, his amazing and marvelous light.

Be strong in the Lord, and trust in the refuge of our God, who spares us from shame. I know we feel like we are in exile, seeing our world changing all around us. We're scared, with 1,500 loved ones infected in our county, 72 loved ones lost. We see 1.3 million sick across our nation and nearly 80k lost to COVID-19. We know that there is more to come, and we have grown weary. We are sick of being stuck at home, isolated and afraid. But this is what we can do to preserve life right now.

In Peter's letter, he is writing to a church suffering persecution and strife. He encourages them, not by calling on them to fight as the world would fight, but to be nourished by spiritual milk and see God's grace at work. Remember that our God will pull us through, and will use this for good. For it is Jesus's death and resurrection that empower us, which redeem us to receive His Holy Spirit within us, and empower us to be part of turning these dark times, into a revelation of God's light.

It is important that when the unbelieving world sees us, they see us reflecting that light. It is hard, because we are human, and we are competitive; we want to see victory now. We want to see anyone who disagrees with us vanquished right away. Like my son in backyard soccer, we want to win on our own terms. But victory on God's terms is through love and mercy. It is by grace and trusting that our God is in control, even when things feel to us like they are out of control.

Remember that you are part of something bigger than yourself – you're a living stone. While it is good to lament that things are not happening as we would want them to, take comfort in the truth that you *are* that living stone, a part of God's solution. Our job isn't to take up arms to fight as the world would take them up, to gain power over others, or keep from losing our standing, but instead we must follow Jesus who gave up that power, and died on a cross reserved for slaves and rebels.

Our job is to love in such a radical way that we stand out as different, to stand with those who are suffering, even as we are suffering or struggling. We must stand with each other, even when we cannot stand alongside each other, by reaching out safely to share a kind word in the ways we can. We must respect others enough to put their needs ahead of our own. He may not get it now, but this is the lesson I want my son to learn. What matters isn't winning as the world picks winners, but playing this game of life as we are called to play, letting the light of Christ shine in us, and through us, into a world of darkness, to build an eternal kingdom, of living stones. Amen.