

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 20, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“A SPIRITUAL HOUSE”

1 Peter 2:2:4, 5

The organization called “Habitat for Humanity” helps build houses for families who cannot otherwise afford them. For forty years and more, the years thousands of houses have been built in many communities. Habitat is building two houses here in Streetsville this year, and one local clergyman is organizing the Streetsville churches into providing support for one of the builds. The details are coming shortly and I think it would be a wonderful witness to our community if local Christians could spend a day together helping build to build a house for a needy family.

Former U. S. President Jimmy Carter became very involved in Habitat following his term in office. One day a man stopped his car in front of one of the houses Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn had helped to build. A boy about 5 years old was standing in the front yard. He ran out and said, “Man, you sure have a nice car.” The man replied, “Well, you sure have a nice house. Who built it?” He thought the boy was going to say, “President Carter.” But instead the boy smiled and said, “Jesus built my house.” The little boy was right. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, both faithful Christians, would happily agree with that.

But let’s talk about another kind of house today - a spiritual house. In 1 Peter chapter 2:4,5, Peter writes, “Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by mortals, but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The spiritual house Peter is speaking of is the church which God is building. Indeed, God is building a spiritual house right here in this place.

Now the church is a spiritual house, but the church must also have a physical structure and a location. Sometimes you hear people say something like, “The church is a spiritual house, so it doesn’t matter if it looks run down or if it’s not clean and painted. We don’t care about that; we’re just concerned with spiritual matters. Better to spend the money on ministry and outreach.” But I wonder if these people think that way about their own houses, especially if they’re inviting guests in? And that argument overlooks the fact that God himself cares about how his house looks. There’s an instructive passage in the prophet Haggai, chapter 1. The Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, and laid the foundation for the temple. But then work on the temple slowed to a crawl, and through Haggi God said to the

people, “You’re busy with your own houses, building nice panelled homes for yourselves, while my house stands in ruins (Haggai 1:4)” And God brought a judgement on the nation for neglecting his house.

You see, what we think of God’s house is a symbol of what we think of God. When we neglect God’s house it’s because we’re neglecting our relationship with God. But the more we care for God, the more we care for his house, and the more we raise for outreach, too. God’s house is a spiritual house, and we honour God, not by neglecting the physical church, but by taking care of it.

But here is what I want us to see today. Peter writes, “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.” God is building a spiritual house in this place. And Peter makes clear that God is building it with two kinds of stones.

First, ***God is building a spiritual house here on the living stone Jesus Christ.***

“Come to him, that living stone, rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.(v. 4) Jesus Christ is the living stone, because he is the Living Lord, who indwells the church by the power of the Holy Spirit. And he is the cornerstone of the church. Verse 6, “For it stands in Scripture, “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious.” The cornerstone was the essential part of a building’s foundation. It was the first stone laid and the stone around which the building was designed. Christ is both the living stone and the cornerstone of the church. As Paul puts it, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Christ Jesus.”

Now there may be a physical structure called church without Christ at the centre, but that is not the spiritual house God is seeking to build. In an old Marx Brothers film, Groucho Marx is shown leaning up against a tall skyscraper. He is dressed as a tramp and a police officer comes along and says, “What do you think you’re doing - holding up the building?” “As a matter of fact, I am,” Groucho says. “Move along,” the police officer says, motioning with his stick. As Grucho moves away, the tall building begins to fall down behind him in a scene eerily prophetic of what happened on 9/11. But that is what happens to the church as a spiritual house if Christ is whisked away. It collapses.

But where Jesus Christ is proclaimed and believed in as God incarnate, crucified Saviour, the Risen and exalted Lord of all, God builds his true spiritual community. Some may disagree, but I would say that here at Streetsville United we have not motioned Christ away from the church. The message we proclaim every week and the hymns we sing and the worship we offer and the teaching we do are all Christ-oriented. I believe that we are still seeking to know and obey and follow Christ. God is building a spiritual house here on the

cornerstone of Jesus Christ, the living stone.

Of course, for some in this world the living stone is a stumbling block. It was true in Christ's earthly life. He was rejected by mortals, as Isaiah had predicted, but he was precious in God's sight. The stone the builders rejected became the very head of the corner. And still Christ is a stone that makes people stumble, a rock that makes them fall. His teachings can be divisive and challenging as well as inviting and comforting. But verse 6 tells us, "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." All who believe in Jesus Christ inherit God's promises and receive God's salvation. We will not be put to shame in this age or in the age to come, for we are held by the divine love which is stronger than the power of sin and evil and death. God's spiritual house seems to be the strongest where Jesus Christ is proclaimed and believed in and obeyed as the unique Son of God. God builds the spiritual house, the church, on the cornerstone of the living stone, Jesus Christ.

Secondly, God is not only building his spiritual house here on Christ, the living stone; ***God is building it with living stones.***

Peter writes, "Like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." God is building his spiritual house here with living stones, and we are those living stones. We who were once dead in our sins and trespasses have been made alive with and through Christ, and now God is using us as living stones in building a spiritual house. Every Sunday I look in the faces of living stones, you who are chosen and precious to God, you whom God is using to build a spiritual house in this place. For over 130 years God has been using living stones in building this spiritual house. Living stones before us helped to build this spiritual house for us, and now we have the privilege of helping to build and revitalise it not only for ourselves, but for future generations, just as past generations did for us.

Peter tells us that we are living stones, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. We are priests, all of us. Protestants believe in and speak of the priesthood of all believers. And a priest is someone who builds a bridge - that's what the word priest means, bridge-builder. Now Jesus is the great high priest who by his own cross and resurrection built the bridge between holy God and sinful humanity; He is God's way of coming to us in human form and he is the way in which we come to the Father. But we priests help to build bridges into our community and into the world so that others may come to know the love of God and the salvation of Jesus Christ. We are those who proclaim to the world the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

I like the King James Version translation of verse 5. "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house." We are not to be dull, sleepy stones, barely breathing; we are to be lively

and active stones. That's who we become through Christ - lively stones - joyful and enthusiastic servants whom God uses to build His spiritual house. And when we don't feel especially lively, Peter tells us what to do, "Come to him, to that living stone." Come to Jesus, he says, refocus on him, find your true north in Him. Receive Christ anew and let the Holy Spirit remake us into lively stones once more.

In our church library we have many books by the Christian author Max Lucado. In his book "The Grip of Grace" he tells of his boyhood when his friends would gather to play football. One dad in the neighbourhood, a die-hard football buff, often joined them. This dad always played for the team that was losing that day. Max Lucado writes, "His appearance in the huddle changed the whole ball game. He was confident, strong, and most of all he had a plan." The boys, fired up by his leadership and his plan always played with new determination.

Lucado says that Jesus does the same for us. He came to join the losing team and his appearance in the game changed everything. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people...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." As we come to Jesus he turns us from dead, silent stones into lively stones. His living presence gives us hope, confidence, courage and love, just as he gave to the first followers. And just as he did for them, he empowers us to undertake lively acts of service and sacrifice on his behalf, for the sake of His house.

Yes, God is building a spiritual house in this place. He is building it on the living stone, Jesus Christ, and he is building it with living stones - that's us. "So come to Him, that living stone, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."