

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 14, 2017 – Mothers' Day**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**1 Peter 2:2-10**

**For Reflection**

**"My mom is definitely my rock."**

- Alicia Keys, American Musician (b.1981)

**"There's no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one."**

— Jill Churchill, American Author (b.1943)

**"Biology is the least of what makes someone a mother."**

— Oprah Winfrey, American media proprietor, talk show host, actress, producer, and philanthropist (b.1954)

**Building Children**

The First Epistle of Peter – was written between 70-90 c.e. – in Greek – by someone using Peter's name in order to give the letter more credibility and power. The letter was addressed to various churches in Asia Minor that were suffering religious persecution.

Greco-Roman household codes included a gender hierarchy which the conversion to Christianity tended to subvert – favoring a more collaborative role between men and women. Therefore, Christians were opening themselves to eradication by the empire in order to preserve the traditional code. This "Peter" person wanted to make Christianity more palatable to the dominant culture – understandably in the interest of safety – therefore some of his writing rejected SOME societal values but accepted others – including the gender hierarchy. [To which I say, "SELL OUT!"] Anyway...

This "Peter" guy quoted or referred to many Psalms and other texts (although none of the Gospels were written yet so he didn't quote from those). He quoted Isaiah 28:16:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him [G-d] will not be put to shame."

Which references Isaiah 8:14:

[G-d] will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The foundation stone – in this case Christ – was either a rock of sanctuary or a stumbling block. And converts to Christianity were being exhorted to be "living stones" in the building of a "spiritual house." The "spiritual sacrifices" to be offered in that "house" or church – were (1) worship of the one G-d and (2) the practice of social ethics.

[Romans12:1 Hebrews 13:15-16]

Our texts these days seem to be filled with references to rocks – as pointed out two weeks ago with our “Rock Opera.” And we have discovered that rocks are not as static as we tend to think. They are in a constant state of change, fluid, alive in many ways. So, this reference to both Christ and humans being “living stones” makes more sense now that we know rocks really are dynamic creatures.

Which, upon reflection, made me look at our metaphors for parenting children – our annual theme for Mothers’ Day. We often use terms like “nurturing” and “growing” and “raising up” – images that call to mind plant-life. Our children are planted like seeds, watered and fertilized by our own efforts, warmed by G-d’s sun-like presence, and eventually harvested as fruitful adults.

But what if we see this endeavor in terms of Peter’s images of Christian life? He does use “motherish” terms to describe the Word of G-d: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk...” And he talks about shaping one’s character to eradicate the negative: “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.” Then he transitions with no warning into this image of building with living stones.

Do we – mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, mentors, police officers, therapists, ministers, Village/Community – do we actually BUILD children? We talk about how experiences “build character” – but don’t the grown-ups in the room ALSO build a child’s character by choosing to expose them intentionally to certain experiences, instilling or installing or plumbing values by example (and sometimes words), by constructing window openings that will shape a kid’s world view – unless they go rogue?

Of course, being LIVING stones, the kids don’t always cooperate with our careful construction. They go rolling off in their own direction – often downhill with gravity – or caddywhompus due to magnetic forces we cannot control. Like all of us, they can become stumbling blocks to themselves and others. But we can always hope that they will return – finding their way back to a useful position in the construction of an ethical and just society. Sometimes they are brought back by force and cemented into place by the authorities – often they are nudged back by those early teachings and all those hours and years of being shown where they might find purpose in the overall scheme of things – even if the original blueprints have been altered.

I’ve noticed that parenting IS often very organic – a series of reactions to circumstances and behaviors – with most of us prone to communicating mixed messages, “alternate” truths and values that pollute or mar our original intentions. Being LIVING stones there will always be erosion and heat induced metamorphosis along the way – not to mention the graffiti of societal influences and the random vandalism of peer pressure.

Our hope as Christians is that G-d and the example of Jesus will help correct those flaws – turn those flaws into lessons learned – chisel those learnings into our hearts for future reference. You may remember that we installed mezzuzahs on the door jambs of this room and the people’s office. We performed this ritual to mark these rooms as sacred space – sanctuaries for worship and the teaching of social ethics. Inside of those decorative cases are the words of the sh’ma – a Jewish prayer found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our G-d, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

The prayer is accompanied by these instructions:

6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 **Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.** 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9 and **write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**

As Jesus and Hillel would summarize: Love G-d and neighbor as yourself – these are cornerstones of a meaningful and constructive life. When you are lost, make your way back to this doorpost – this prayer – and you will find your way home.

This may account for this congregation’s return to the desire for a church building – the desire for living stones that stand for something – that cradle our worship and work – that shelter our values and offer a sense of “place.” But our texts tell us that external buildings are only metaphors for the true sanctuary within ourselves. Those mezzuzahs are portable and can be installed on any doorpost – but the real doorposts are in our hearts. Wedding rings are “external and visible signs of an internal and spiritual covenant.” The real church is made up of living stones – you and me – each other. And that is what we are building in our kids.

I could go on for a few more pages about how “building” a child is a superb metaphor when raising a child with special needs. As a child presents with building blocks out of place or missing – there are far more conscious choices about what needs to be installed – executive functions, fine motor skills, self-regulation skills, cross-brain and neural pathways – and more. Parents of special needs children become contractors – bringing in Occupational and Physical Therapists, Tutors, MFCC’s, M.D.s, PhD’s, neurologists, nutritionists, osteopaths, reiki practitioners, plumbers, electricians, carpenters – and Facebook Village Advisors – to build the child and the structures by which that child can flourish.

But I’ll stop there. The metaphor works. Thank you, Peter of the Epistle, for using it and passing it on.

As we continue the work of building children – and one another – in this sacred space – may we remember always that we are working with living stones – building upon the cornerstone of G-d's own child.

Thanks Mom!

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 14, 2017 – Easter 5 – Year A

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**1 Peter 2:1-10**

1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation - 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. **4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5 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. 6 For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." 7 To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," 8 and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 9 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 his marvelous light. 10 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.