

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

PEOPLE OF THE WAY

First Peter is the applied truth of John 14. When we read that list of vices, did you notice that there was something missing? Usually when we read a list like this in scripture, we also get a list of virtues that go along with it. But not here; not unless you can see the images that Jesus offers us.

When people in the first century were baptized, they would then proceed to take their first communion. After taking the Lord's Supper, it was also the custom to give the people milk mixed with honey so that they might understand that in reenacting Jesus' death they are claiming that death for themselves—death to what they would choose in favor of taking on what God loves and where God works. That death would not be bitter, but sweet like milk with honey mixed in.

If you'd known this life, if you'd traversed that chasm that exists between trying to live on your own and without Jesus, without God guiding your thoughts and actions, if you've tried it independently—this journey of faith—you have known great failure. But if, finally, you have surrendered to a way of life that you could not have imagined for yourself, then you have seen how good life can be and you have known in those moments when you were obedient, when you were willing; you have known true purpose and you have experienced what this world longs to know.

Peter is talking to first-century Christians some time after Jesus' death and resurrection—maybe even decades later—and he is telling them that we all have to become spiritual babes, newborns. We all have to understand that we are called to grow from birth in Christ into discipleship. He uses some great images: living stones. I dare say you have never seen a stone characterized as living, even if it's covered in mold or lichen, the stone is not alive—except when we see Christ as the cornerstone of our life. Don't you feel a little bit sorry for Peter when Christ uses terms like living stones? Because he had been called the rock upon which God would build the church and he knew that his own disobedience, weakness, and fear had betrayed Jesus at the moment that Christ declared him the rock, the *petrus*. Living stones, fulfilling the heritage that we have as God's chosen people.

We talk about spiritual sacrifice, we sang about spiritual sacrifice, and some of you have embodied that this week. I have watched you as you have cared for Emma and her family, for the McWhorter family and theirs, I've watched you give willingly. Some of you will make a spiritual sacrifice, and already have maybe, as you go down the street and offer your strength and encouragement to the Andrews as they build their home. You know what it is to be God's people. You know the way and you know what the scenery along that way looks like. It looks like people being fed, people being embraced and encouraged.

I think one thing that everyone who went to Liberia feels was the enormous welcome and embrace that we received; the sheer gladness in people's eyes that we were there. People of the way experience that each day whether in their homes, schools, or at work, you understand that you are different in the best sense of the word; not better, but more purposeful in the way in which you conduct yourself. That's what a spiritual sacrifice is.

I guess maybe the whole idea of royalty is lost on us. If there's one thing we don't like, it's an American royal family. We just rejected that out of hand. But there was a time when royalty meant respect and trustworthiness. People within a kingdom would be cared for because the royals answered to a higher authority than just their appetites. As such, we have become, Peter says, priests to one another.

Some people believe that priesthood of all believers means that we no longer need priests set aside for work. But the truth is that we need more. We need to all become priests for one another and when you see a priest fulfilling his purpose, you know there is no slander or malice or guile, no insincerity and no envy. You know that you can trust that what you say will stay with that person.

This is the way in which we live to a higher calling, but it's all too easy to measure ourselves by comparing ourselves to one another. Where we live, where we went on vacation, how far we got in our careers or didn't get, how much money we can amass. We do it, don't we? We measure ourselves by our accomplishments and in so doing we forget the true measure of our worth is the mercy we have received from God. In order to receive mercy, you have to face your own shortcomings, your own weaknesses, the opposite of your accomplishments or the weakness even within them—that insatiable need for approval and affirmation.

But when we measure ourselves by the mercy we have already inherited from our Lord and Savior, all of that evaporates and we recognize that God has placed a worth on us and in us and for us—as Melvin Goodwyn said in the beginning, in spite of us. In spite of us, God has shown us mercy and for a world where we are really resident aliens, in a world where we don't quite fit being power-mad and control-hungry, in a world where those things no longer satisfy us, we recognize that the mercy we have received is sweet and pure and good. It's like the weather we've been experiencing lately—it's refreshing and renewing. If you've forgotten your worth, remember how much mercy God has shown you and then we will be the people we were intended to be—people of the way.

So may it be. Amen.