

This morning, we are in the third week of our sermon series through the New Testament book of 1 Peter, a letter written by the apostle Peter, one of the early church leaders, to a group of Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. I have entitled this sermon series “Stranger,” because one of the main themes throughout this letter is that those of us who believe in Jesus are citizens of heaven, living here as strangers or resident aliens. Our primary identity, values, and hope are not given to us by the culture in which we live but are found in heaven. As we learned last week, God calls us to be holy as he is holy, which means to be set apart to belong to Him and to be used by Him for His purposes.

This week, we will be in 1 Peter 2:4-10, a passage we read last week but into which I want to do a deeper dive today so that we can understand why belonging to this community we call the church is so important.

*1 Peter 2:4-10 - As you come to him, the living Stone-- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," ⁸ and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock **that makes them fall.**" They stumble because they disobey the message-- which is also what they were destined for. ⁹ But 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 wonderful light. ¹⁰ 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.*

This passage is a great passage for helping us to understand why being a part of the church community is so important for the follower of Jesus. There are three things in particular that I want to highlight to answer the question of why we need community.

1) The “Christ-in-us” of the community

As you come to him, the living Stone-- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Peter tells us that as we come to Jesus, we are being built into a spiritual house. Now, there are many pictures of the church given in the New Testament, such as the family of God or the body of Christ. In this section, we see the church depicted as a temple. Not as a brick-and-mortar building, but as a community of people being fit together by God into a figurative building in which God dwells.

Think quickly through the history of God's presence in human history. In the beginning, we see God walking with Adam and Eve. After the fall, we see humanity losing the presence of God as they are banished from the garden. As the Old Testament proceeds, we see God visiting specific individuals such as Abraham and Jacob. In the Exodus, we see God going before the travelers in a pillar of fire. Eventually, he gives them instructions to build a tabernacle, so that He can dwell in their midst, in the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest once a year could enter. Once they settle in the land, Solomon builds a temple. And then, in the New Testament, we see God's presence among the people as Jesus, God in the flesh. And when Jesus dies, the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that all who trust in Jesus have access to God. And now, this side of Jesus' death and resurrection, God lives in believers by the Holy Spirit, but dwells in the midst of the community of believers in a profound way. And now, we are all priests, with direct access to God's presence.

Why do we need community? **First and foremost, because God dwells in our midst in a special way to meet with His people.** How many times have I heard from people that while it was great to be able to worship and hear the sermon from home, there is something different, something more spiritually powerful, about being here in the presence of God's people to worship and hear the Word preached.

In the 1 Peter passage, Peter quotes from Isaiah 28 and Psalm 118 to proclaim Jesus as the cornerstone of our spiritual house, the foundation of the foundation of the community. He is the stone the builders rejected; as John 1 tells us:

***John 1:10-13** - He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

In 1 Peter 2, Peter tells us the same thing that the rest of the New Testament tells us, that our eternal destiny depends upon how we respond to Jesus.

Acts 4:9-12 - If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Again – there are many images of Jesus in the New Testament: the bread of life, the water of life, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the gate. This image of Jesus as the cornerstone tells us that the church community is built upon Him. The cornerstone had to be cut perfectly for the rest of the building to be strong.

We need community for the “Christ-in-us” of community. Not just that God dwells in our midst to meet with us, but that as we align ourselves with the cornerstone, the more we will reflect God to the world in the way we live and love. **It’s like those programs where aligning the text box makes the line go through it.** As we align ourselves with Jesus, we showcase His presence and power. And the more we as a community align ourselves with Jesus, the stronger we will be collectively.

Your holiness matters! It affects the other stones!

2) The perspective of the community

⁹ But 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 wonderful light. ¹⁰ 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.

Look at the phrases Peter uses. He is speaking to both Jews and Gentiles, but he says that they are ALL God’s chosen people, a holy nation. Remember that these are terms that formerly were applied to the Israelites:

*Exodus 19:5-6 - Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a **holy** nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."*

But now, because of Christ, these terms are no longer reserved for the Jews. God has made a new people, called together a new community, one made up of believers from every walk of life, ethnicity, or any other factor that divides in this world.

Ephesians 2:11-22 - *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)--* ¹² *remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.* ¹³ *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.* ¹⁴ *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,* ¹⁵ *by abolishing in his flesh the law with its **commandments and regulations**. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,* ¹⁶ *and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.* ¹⁷ *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.* ¹⁸ *For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.* ¹⁹ *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household,* ²⁰ *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the **chief cornerstone**.* ²¹ *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* ²² *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Or, as Paul writes in Galatians 3:26-29:

Galatians 3:26-29 - *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,* ²⁷ *for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* ²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹ *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

There is meant to be unity in the body. Our primary identity is as a Christian, not in our ethnicity or gender or political party or anything else. This is so important, particularly today with the philosophies of this world that try to separate us into categories.

But in this unity, there is diversity, and we need the perspective of the different members of the community in order to grow into maturity, in two specific ways:

Speaking the truth in love to each other

Ephesians 4:15 - Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

We need friends who encourage us and challenge us. We need friends who point out things that we are blind to, that we can not see about ourselves. Listen to *Hebrews 10:24-5 - And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

You need friends who encourage you, for life is hard. You need friends who remind you of the promises of God, of who He is, of who you are in His sight. You need people who will walk with you through hard times. Whether this is one-on-one with friends, in a community group, or in the worship service on a Sunday, you need people in your life who will speak the truth in love to you.

Sharing our knowledge of God

We also need the perspectives that others have of God. You can not just “do church” from home and grow the way you can in community. Listen to this incredible quote from C.S. Lewis’ book *The Four Loves*:

*In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald’s reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him ‘to myself’ now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to become a real friend. They can then say, as the blessed souls say in Dante, ‘Here comes one who will augment our loves’ ... In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious ‘nearness by resemblance’ to Heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah’s vision are crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ to one another (**Isaiah 6:3**). The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we all have.*

Lewis is talking about what it was like when one of his close friends died, and how instead of having more of the other friend, he now had less of him, because there were certain things about that friend that were only brought out by the deceased friend. We all need friends of different backgrounds and approaches in order to bring out unique aspects of our character and challenge us in different ways.

I am an introvert, and my favorite times in the sanctuary are when it is just me and God. However, I still need community. I need others to confess to, to hold me accountable, to push me higher, to share different perspectives of God, to tell me what I am blind to. I need people to serve, to disciple, to build up, to pray for, to encourage. And I need people who do the same for me. The same is true for you.

3) The gifts of the community

⁹ But 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 wonderful light.

You are all priests, mediators between God and people. You have spiritual sacrifices to offer. Your service is needed here. Whatever your unique gifts are, they are part of building up the house of God, this community. Like living stones, each stone depends on the other stones.

***1 Peter 4:10** - Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.*

How has God gifted you. And how can you use those gifts to serve God and His community? Incredibly, because of Christ, your efforts are “acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” They are received and appreciated.

Do not get comfortable at home, but come back to the community to experience the presence of God in the midst of His people, to hear the perspective of your brothers and sisters, and to serve and be served.