

Who Bears the Load?

1 Peter 2:1-10

Reformation Sunday/Anniversary Celebration

Dr. Craig Barnes

Sunday, October 28, 2007

Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

When Peter began his letter to the churches in Asia Minor, he addressed it to the "Exiles of the Dispersion." That's important. The last time we heard that phrase in the Bible, it referred to the Hebrews who had been carried to Babylon in captivity. Babylon was the anti-Jerusalem, or the unholy city. It seemed devoid of sacredness, and the Hebrew exiles had a hard time worshiping there.

When Peter wrote to the early church, it was also having a hard time worshiping in its society. The church was surrounded by mystery cults and idolatry, hedonism and greed. Its cities were anything but holy. So the church began to act like exiles living and working in Babylon where they could only long for holiness.

You know what that feels like, don't you? Our days are jam-packed with the agendas of making money and making the grade. Daily we stand before copiers that jam and computers that crash, and it's the only place we seem to pray. We relentlessly throw ourselves into car pools and trips to the vet, to the grocery store, and to the cleaners. We have planes to catch, clients to call, reports to write, and deals to close. Then at the end of a long day of this, we return home to make the dinner, wash the dishes, help with algebra, wade through the mountain of laundry, and fix the leaky toilet. None of it seems holy! All of it wears down your soul.

Since we are creatures made in the image of God, we all yearn to find holiness. It just comes in the wiring and is part of what it means to be human. When we live too long exiled from anything that transcends, inspires, or compels us to bend our knees, our souls begin to wither. People can walk around for a long time with dried out souls, but they know, and you know, that they are not fully alive. We just have to find holiness.

The amazing thing is that every time we do encounter the holy, we try to domesticate it into something we can manage. The rhetoric of religious, political, and social agendas sometimes reveals this. We hear so much talk about God's politics, God's principles for a successful life, God's plan for the family, or God's preferences about the war. But it is striking how much God's preferences always look like the preferences of the person speaking about them. Maybe that stuff isn't holiness at all. Maybe it is just ourselves written in capital letters. Holiness cannot fit in your pocket.

As a pastor, I have discovered that one of our favorite places to search for holiness is in the past. An old couple pulls a tattered shoebox down from the shelf in the closet. They sit on the couch and begin to look through all of the yellowed photographs it contains. They tell a few well-known stories as they gaze at each one: "Remember when..." It's a very tender scene. It seems almost holy. Almost. What they don't remember are the awful fights, the terrible words said in anger, or the fears that kept them up all night. The past is easy to reconstruct into something we want to be holy.

The reason we like to find holiness in the past is the same reason we try to find it in political platforms and social agendas. It is easier to control. But as soon as you get a leash on holiness, it is no longer holy.

So let us be clear that this anniversary celebration, so resplendent in cherished photographs and treasured memories, is not a way of revisiting the good old days when we were a holy place. No, let's go ahead and tell all the story. Before this congregation voted to leave downtown in the 1960s and move to this site, there were awful fights, terrible words said in anger, and fears that kept, at least, the pastor up all night.

After this glorious sanctuary was built, and the congregation held their first worship service inside, it was only half full. A lot of folks were worried. As visitors began to fill up those empty pews, what do you think a lot of the members told them? "Oh, back when we were at N Street, that's when we had church." I think that drove Dr. Elson nuts. I think that today he is straining to reach down over the balcony of heaven to interrupt our anniversary celebration to say, "Yes, we did it, but it wasn't easy. It was hard. It was messy." When Dr. Evans came to be your next pastor, what do you think he heard? He heard, "Oh, when Dr. Elson was here, this was a holy temple." And when Dr. Kirkland came, what do you think he heard? "Oh, when Dr. Evans was here, we had such a spiritual ministry." And after Dr. Kirkland ascended out of your sight, and I came, what do you think I heard? You get the point.

The point is that in spite of the fact that each of those periods was messier than we remember, the church was holy in those days. But it is not where holiness is found for the National Presbyterian Church today. Today's holiness can only be found in today's mess. Yes, we live out of the Holy Bible and the holy theological tradition, but that has to be spoken confessionally into today's context. That's just the way the incarnation works.

When Peter was speaking to those who felt they were exiled from holiness, he reminded them that holiness only exists where Jesus Christ exists as the cornerstone of the church. This cornerstone was laid not in 1967, but in a barn in Bethlehem 2007 years ago. The church began with parents who had made a mess of their son's birth. It is built upon the work of a Savior who entered the messiness of broken lives, hungry lives, lives torn apart by demons and sin. It finds salvation in the passionate, bloody mess of the cross. And after this Savior rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, he continues his saving work through the Holy Spirit who for some strange reason has chosen to use a messy thing like the church.

Now I've got to tell you, this is not how I would have done it. I don't personally care for mess, and I would have come up with a strategic plan for order. I would have built a holy temple and had a lot of clear policies for entering it. Because that way we could

control the holiness and keep it from getting all messed up. But God let us try that once. It's called the Old Testament. And like every effort to control holiness, what it produced was a lot of laws and judgments, a very tidy building, but little real holiness in daily life. Apparently God isn't all that bothered by mess, confusion, arguments, or even by sinners. What bothers God is any effort to control holiness. Holiness is found only in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ is alive, at work here today, in the messiness of our lives. So if you feel exiled from holiness, it is because of your choice, not God's. In Christ, God has brought holiness near. It may not look the way it did yesterday. It may not look like what you dreamed. No, it looks like what Christ is dreaming for you today.

"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house," Peter tells us. That implies that you have a choice. It is the same choice that every generation of the National Church has had to face. Will you let yourselves be built into a spiritual house? You don't do the building. Christ does. You don't get to keep the house of yesterday because Christ loves to remodel. You don't even get to be all that worried about whether this house will stand. Christ alone bears the load. What you get to do is receive the holy house.

That brings us back to grace. (You were wondering when I was going to get to grace.) Grace isn't something you manage; it is something you just receive with a grateful heart. The grace of Jesus Christ is new every day, at work building this church into a spiritual house. Just to be clear, this house is not a building. The spiritual house exists wherever Christ exists, and Christ has a passion for going to the messiest places. He is in the back of your minivan among the discarded toys and empty juice boxes. He is in the busy office, in the boring business meeting, and in the conflicts waiting for you tomorrow. He is in the pathos of the hospital emergency room, the eerie silence of the nursing home late at night, and in the bustling morning rush out of the metro station. He is certainly in the new day of the church. It is all Holy Land.

It is up to you to see that, and give thanks. If you do, you will stand strong on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. But if you do not see the presence of Christ among you today, Peter warns you will stumble over this stone and fall. And fall to your undoing. All of the saints who have gone before you and were faithful in their hour with this beloved church are cheering for you from heaven's shores: "Choose to stand! Choose to give thanks! Choose to see the new outpouring of grace on your new day, and let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." Amen.