

## From Milk to Meat

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NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 6 (NRSV) *All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. <sup>2</sup>Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup>He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law... <sup>6</sup>Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

I'm told that over a period of time people start to look like their pets. Or, you've heard about husbands and wives starting to look alike after many years of marriage. I don't know. Jo Lynn doesn't look anything like me (thank goodness!), and we've been married 51 years.

Still, there is something to the sayings. People who live together develop common habits, common vocabulary... In a sense they do start looking alike. They at least influence one another's manner.

I think the principle can be applied to houses. Have you seen "America's Castles" on A&E? Two brothers, Frederick and Alfred Vanderbilt, grew up in the same household; yet as adults their homes were quite different. Both were expensive—extravagantly expensive—ostentatiously expensive. But Frederick's mansion in New York's fashionable Hyde Park, was built of marble, with tall, Greek columns. It reflected his love of the spotlight—his need for attention and approval.

Alfred's "Sagamore", in the Adirondaks, was built of logs and rough stone. It was a place where people could get away from the glamour and the pace of Manhattan—could kick off their shoes and let down their hair.

One was "main street": brass band, sweeping spotlights and the Goodyear blimp; the other was mountain retreat: intimate, rustic and quiet. Each was a reflection of who lived inside.

Other houses reflect the one who designed them. Frank Lloyd Wright's home, "Samara", in West Lafayette, Indiana, could hardly be mistaken for the work of any other architect. Every building he designed is identifiable.

Houses do, I think, take on personality—usually either that of the one who lives inside, or of the one who designed or built them. On the other hand, there are houses that seem to *form* the character of those who live inside. Prisons. Monasteries. The "Delta SIG" House.

In a second text for this morning, I Peter 2:1-10 uses similar imagery:

**(1 PETER 2:1-10 NRSV) *Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity,***  
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envy, and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. <sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.”

<sup>7</sup> 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,”  
<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

“...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...”

First, note the passive tense: “Let yourselves be built...” Second (and this is crucial): note that Peter isn't saying, “...each of you...” He's writing to the church—the whole body of believers gathered and scattered throughout the area known today as Turkey. The personal pronoun is plural: “Y'all” let yourselves be built into “a” (singular) spiritual house.”

His only reference to individuals is his metaphor of stones that are built into a spiritual house. But until that building takes place, those stones are just unrelated rocks lying on the ground; of no real value, in themselves. Just rocks.

It's interesting that the art of stone masonry in the first century didn't involve the use of mortar or any other adhesive to hold the stones together. Each stone was cut to fit. No two stones were exactly the same; each was cut into a unique shape so it would fit in its place. Each stone's shape was dictated by the shapes of the other stones immediately surrounding it.

You won't find much *anywhere* in the Bible addressed to, or about, individuals. The Bible is about “the *people* of God”—the *community* of faith. When there is a message to or about an individual, it almost always comes in the form of instructions or a message to be given to the gathered assembly of God's people.

Now, it's true: nobody affirmed the individual person more than Jesus—because each of us is created in the image of God. But none of us contains the *whole* image of God. Alone, we remain partial—like rocks lying on the ground. That's the condition referenced in I Peter when he says, “*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation...*” It's not an uncommon metaphor in the New Testament. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*I gave you milk, not*

*meat, because you weren't ready for it."*

We mature spiritually, just like we mature physically; we move from milk to meat. We need something to bring us together—something to shape us—to fit us together—to bind us into maturity of faith—a unity of expression so that our individual, partial reflections of God's image unite to express the fullness of God.

In the Bible that binding agent is "Covenant". It's one of the most important themes in the Bible. God made a covenant with Israel; and it was that covenant that bound the people to God and to each other. It was that covenant that made the community of Israel stronger than the sum total of all the individual Hebrews that could be assembled at any point in time, apart from that covenant.

In the Nehemiah story, sixteen days after the wall was finished, the people gathered for a dedication service, and Ezra read from the Book of the Law. At the heart of that book is the Covenant. Peter's epistle to the Christians in Turkey repeats some of the strong metaphors by which the covenant between God and Israel is identified: "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...*"

So, you see, this is a transition passage—Peter is laying groundwork for describing the "Household of God." It's generally understood that the church—by virtue of its recognition of Jesus as Israel's Messiah—is the "spiritual house" that is being built with living stones. And you and I are among those stones.

This "spiritual house" isn't a social club which exists solely for the needs of its members. It's not a cocoon in which to hide and escape from people who make us uncomfortable because they're not like us. Nor is it a religious store, with a paid staff to tend the store and keep the shelves stocked. It is, rather, a household of God's people joined in Christ's New Covenant of mutual love and commitment.

There are many metaphors in Scripture that describe that Covenant: Household of God; Family of God; chosen people; royal priesthood; holy nation. All the metaphors are good. Today, we focus on the metaphor of a building—perhaps a temple. Paul says our bodies are temples—a dwelling place for God.

God builds the house (v. 5) God lays the cornerstone (v. 6). By virtue of God's mercy and nothing else, we are invited to come in and live there. But first there has to be a house. And there is no house until the stones—the living stones (that's you and me), are assembled, cut to fit, and laid in our proper place. You see, no one can "have" a church until someone is willing to "be" the church—to take his/her proper place among the other "living stones" in the "spiritual house".