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**Series: Moving Onward Towards Perfection**  
**Sermon: The Civil War to WWI (1860-1913)**

**I Peter 2:4-12**

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans 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 cornerstone,”  
8 and,  
“A stone that causes people 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, God’s special possession, 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.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

**Sermon**

For Christmas, both Stephanie and I received the 23 and me genetic test from Ancestry. If you’re not sure what this is, it’s pretty simple. You spit into a test tube, send it off, and this company tells you about your heritage. 25 % European, 43% Middle Eastern, 5% Labradoodle, or whatever. We haven’t done it yet, it makes me a little squeemish. I’m not big into conspiracy theories, but this company just inked a 300 million dollar deal to a major drug company. They have your DNA, they know you’re stuff. Good and bad. Someone’s gonna profit off of this, and it ain’t me. I also have heard stories of family members finding out that they weren’t related - Happy Birthday, here’s a test that proves you’re not really a part of our family. Or just the opposite. NPR reported one married couple found out that they are really cousins - didn’t know of any shared family before they got married. So maybe I’ll spit in the tube, and maybe not. We’ll see. If I do, I’ll find out that I’m a mishmash of a bunch of different things. My wife will find out she’s this and that. And then our kids will know that they are who knows what kind of concoction - but a blending of traditions throughout the ages. Our DNA is always changing, as the generations move on. But tests like this are at the root of some other relevant questions in our culture. Where do I belong? How do I fit in?

The people of Peter's day and age had those same questions. Where do I belong, how do I fit in? Peter wrote this letter to Christians on the fringes of society who were suffering persecution. They met together in house churches. He wrote to encourage them. He reminds them of what Jesus has done for us. Peter calls them to Holy living. He is explaining their role in the kingdom of God; giving them their identity. This is a message for the faith community and not just for isolated individuals. For Christians, this is their DNA. From this, all the answers to our questions will naturally flow.

The defining issue then and for today is Who is Jesus? It is a defining issue for every human being, every heart, everywhere. This includes us. Peter straightforwardly reminds the recipients of his letter what God has said in the Old Testament. He calls it scripture and it was the only scripture they had. Peter is quoting the old stories to prove his point that day. There is a chosen precious stone and it is Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. He is the Living Stone. For those that believe, Jesus is the cornerstone. What does that mean? It is a stone uniting two masonry walls at an intersection. A stone representing the nominal starting place in the construction of a monumental building, usually carved with the date and laid with appropriate ceremonies. Down at the old church on the bluff, there was a cornerstone laid, according to the records. And a time capsule was laid within. When we moved up from the bluff 20 years ago, some remembered that there was a cornerstone and time capsule. But no one remembered where it was, or even how to get into it. It's still down there - maybe someday they'll find it. The cornerstone is something that is essential, indispensable, or basic. It is the chief foundation on which something is constructed or developed. For the believer, Jesus is the sure foundation upon which they build their relationship with God the Father; all their personal relationships; their relationship to the community; and, their relationship to the world at large.

On the other hand, for those that have rejected the claims of Jesus on their lives, he is their capstone. The capstone finishes the job; it seals it as completed. And, the implication is that the unbeliever's fate is for them to stumble; for them to fall. Peter says they are disobedient to God's message, Jesus the full revelation of the Father. The fall is long; the landing is harder; and, their destiny is for eternity.

So the one who trusts in Jesus, will never be put to shame. In other words, Jesus will not let them down. You can count on him. We are like living stones; in fact, we are like The living Stone himself. We are all being built into a spiritual house. We are the very Church itself. Not any grand cathedral; not stadiums; not even our sanctuary is the church. We the people are the church; we are the spiritual house Peter describes. We know that the Holy Spirit inhabits every believer, but here we are told that each one of us is used by God, for his purposes, and formed into what he needs for this spiritual house.

But I like how Peter puts it: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" This is Peter. The First Pope in Catholic Tradition. The pastor to other pastors. The priest to the other priests. But this letter was written to the laity. The everyday Christian. Those who were day laborers, carpenters and mothers, the butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, and business owners and slaves and children and gentile and Jew. Little people - like us. This wasn't written to those in charge, or those whose jobs were to be actual priest. But you. You are a royal priesthood. A chosen people.

You may remember from last week, that the Methodist Church had split in the decades before the Civil War, into the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South as the church wrestled with the issue of slavery. The Civil War devastated The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Its churches lay in ruins or were seriously damaged. Many of its clergy were killed or wounded, and its educational, publishing, and missionary programs were disrupted. But growth still happened as the country tried to heal. Sunday schools were strengthened through increased training of teachers, and publishing houses maintained ambitious programs to furnish members with literature. Higher educational standards for the clergy were cultivated, and theological seminaries were founded. The period was also marked by theological developments and

controversies. The holiness movement, which emphasized a Christian's experience of entire sanctification (Are you born again), together with the rise of liberal theology and the Social Gospel Movement, were sources of conflict. Rural and poorer segments of the church, especially those associated with the holiness movement, were skeptical of prestige and affluence. A Methodist preacher, Benjamin Titus Roberts, had formed the Free Methodist Church in 1860 to oppose worldliness, especially the grand middle class churches in cities financed by renting pews. He was stripped of his credentials. There's a funny little statement in our current Discipline that states that our pews shall forever be free. You see, that wasn't always the case. In the 1800's, many churches financed their work by renting out pews. You had your seat. You paid for it. In one church we visited last year in Michigan, the policy once was that no one, besides you or your family, could sit in the pew that you rented, until after the first hymn was sung. After that time, you'd lose your reservation - and the riff raff could take your pew that day. In time, the Methodist Church saw the error of its ways and formally apologized to Rev. Roberts and reinstated his credentials, albeit after his death.

In 1895, the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene (now the Nazarene Church) was formed under the encouragement of Phineas Bresee, a Methodist Episcopal preacher. The goal for the new denomination, founded in 1894, was to have churches furnished to welcome the poor where holiness was preached.

Another issue that caused substantial debate in the churches during this period was lay representation. A couple of generations before, the Methodist Protestants had granted the laity representation from the time they organized in 1830. The clergy in The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, The Evangelical Association, and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ were much slower in permitting laity an official voice. It was not until the 1930's that the last of these churches allowed lay representation.

You see, at the General Conference and Annual Conference, it was only a gathering of the clergy. Individual churches didn't have representation at the seat into the life of the church. Everything was decided by the clergy. We've moved from those days. Even today, at Annual Conference, we have two folk that go for us. Me, and a lay representative - in our case Sheila Florey. Sheila represents this church in what we say and do as a Methodist Church in Oregon. At the world level, we have General Conference, where the representation is also split 50-50. Clergy and lay. We in Oregon-Idaho send a two people to General Conference. In our case, both women, one clergy and one lay.

What I like about this is that the ministry isn't just reserved to the clergy. We are all a part of the body of Christ. You have a ministry. I have a ministry. The people on the left side of the church are in ministry. The people on the right side of the church are in ministry. The people in the middle. I don't know what you do - BUT YES! You have a ministry.

Compared to other churches, we operate in the middle ground. Methodists sit at the crossroads of many different points. If we were to take the spit of our church and send it away to find out what we are, we might be surprised what kind of mishmash concoction we are! Yes, maybe it's a bad metaphor, but go with me on it for a minute. We are Evangelical and we are Sacramental Mainline. We operate in both worlds. We sing old songs. We sing new songs. Do we have a Pope? No. Is our church ruled by clergy in dark robes and secret councils. God I hope not. My wife grew up in a tradition where the religious leader's proclamations were divine law. Not a healthy place to be. Our laity have a lot of say in what happens in our church. On the other hand, are we ruled by populist demand, where there is no tradition or history or accountability? No, we are connected to each other and by a line of traditions. That's where we get the word Mainline. We have a mainline back to Jesus. We were Catholics for 1,500 years. They broke off to be Anglican, where the Methodists came from. There is a heritage there. Mainline. And we have clergy who are keeper of traditions, service and special tasks like preaching and sacraments. We operate in both worlds. We believe in miracles, and we believe in science. We are both conservative and liberal. Conservative in actions and judgement, but liberal in love and grace. We aren't wishy-washy. We are radically in center. Our DNA is ever changing, as the generations move on.

But know this: You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Charged to serve. Charged to pray. Charged to love. Charged to praise. All of us carry the light. And the family of God said, Amen.