



**Sermon Delivered by ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson
Easter 5 – BC Synod Convention 2008**

Acts 7:55-60 and Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

- 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk,
so that by it you may grow into salvation-
- 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.
- 4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals
yet chosen and precious in God's sight,
- 5 and 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.
- 6 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."
- 7 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," and
- 8 "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.
- 9 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 marvellous light.
- 10 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.

John 14:1-14

- 1 Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Believe in God, believe also in me.
- 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.
If it were not so, would I have told you
that I go to prepare a place for you?
- 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again and will take you to myself,
so that where I am, there you may be also.
- 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going."
- 5 Thomas said to him,
"Lord, we do not know where you are going.
How can we know the way?"
- 6 Jesus said to him,
"I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.
- 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also.
From now on you do know him and have seen him."
- 8 Philip said to him,
"Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

- 9 Jesus said to him,
"Have I been with you all this time, Philip,
and you still do not know me?
Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.
How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"
- 10 Do you not believe
that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?
The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own;
but the Father who dwells in me does his works.
- 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me;
but if you do not,
then believe me because of the works themselves.
- 12 Very truly, I tell you,
the one who believes in me
will also do the works that I do
and, in fact, will do greater works than these,
because I am going to the Father.
- 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name,
so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.
- 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

It is a pleasure to be here with you today. And I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this family of God that we call the ELCIC.

Where do you go when your heart is troubled? Of course, with Mother's Day being right around the corner, the correct answer might be – to MOM! But is there a PLACE where you go?

I want you to think for a minute. Have you ever in your life, now or in the past, had a place in your house where you went when your heart was troubled? A place where you felt safe and secure? A place where you could for at least a while block out the troubles of your life?

For some of you it might be a place where you could be alone, away from other people, perhaps in your bedroom, in the attic, in the basement, or perhaps your place to be alone was the same as mine when I was growing up – in the bathroom!

Or perhaps your safe place was a place where you could be with other people. Maybe in the living room with your family, maybe in the kitchen with Mom, hanging out while she baked bread or cooked supper. Or perhaps your special place was outside, in the garage, hanging out with dad, in the barn, in a tree house. You may have had any number of special places, perhaps in sequence, perhaps all at the same time. I think we all need to have places where we feel we belong, where we feel safe, where we feel that we can relax and be ourselves and be accepted that way.

I think that is why this lesson from John is so comforting and important for many of us. "Do not let your hearts be troubled...In my father's house there are many dwelling places.... I go to prepare a place for you." What wonderful assurances. The thought of having a place where our heart will not be troubled. The thought of having a place prepared for us. A place where we can go and be

safe, be comforted, be at peace. This is a text that is used a lot at funerals, for obvious reasons. It offers a wonderful hope, especially when a loved one has suffered and struggled in this life, that there will be a place for them in heaven. And for many of us, that is what our idea of heaven is, a place where we can go, where God will recognize us and receive us with open arms. A place where we will no longer have the cares, the burdens, the stresses, the worries, that so often make up a part of our earthly lives.

I have to tell you a story. When my niece Hannah was three she went through a period where she was very concerned about what heaven was like. She wanted to be reassured that there would be a place for her, and she wanted to make sure that it was a place where she was going to feel comfortable. And so she asked a lot of questions. One night her concern was, Mommy, where will I sleep when I go to heaven? Her mom tried to reassure her that God would have a great big warm cozy comfy bed all prepared for her and that she did not need to worry about it. But not yet satisfied, she asked another question. How will I know which bed is my bed? God wouldn't like it if I slept in his bed, especially if I wet it!

Seriously though, I think Hannah's concerns echo concerns we all have about having a safe and comfortable place to be where we can shut out the cares of the world and escape our troubled hearts. But I don't think we look for that place only in Heaven. I think we also spend a lot of time and effort trying to find places where we can shut out the troubles of our world while we are here on earth. And there is something very healthy about that. Even Jesus would occasionally leave the crowds and his disciples. Leave the troubles that surrounded him and go off alone to pray.

Sometimes I think that is what we look for in the church, a place to get a way from the world. A place where we can be alone with God, or at least surrounded only by like-minded folks. We often treat the buildings we worship in as if they are an oasis, a refuge, a place where we can shut out the rest of the world. But is this the kind of dwelling place that Jesus had in mind?

You see, the lesson from 1st Peter talks about another kind of building. But here the building is made of living stones. This building has a very living and lively Christ as its cornerstone. When we think of this building of living stones and then remember Jesus' words from today's Gospel lesson where he describes himself as the way and the truth and the life, we begin to get a different picture. These are not the descriptions of a static place. They are words that are full of life and energy.

We know that the way of Jesus is the way of the cross. We know that the truth of Jesus often meant that he was in conflict with the ruling powers of his time. And we know that his life, which we are called to emulate, was not easy. And perhaps we also need to remember that although Jesus occasionally went off on his own to recharge, for the most part he did not withdraw from the world, or withdraw from his troubles. Instead, he always went out to the trouble, went out into the midst of the world.

These two different understandings of the church seem to be in conflict. But it's not an either/or situation. We are called to dual responsibilities. On the one hand, we are called to be a house made of living stones. We are called to follow the way, to search for the truth, to be apart of the life in the world to which our Lord calls us. We are called to be a church *In Mission for Others*!!!!

But on the other hand, we are also called to be a refuge and oasis, to be a safe welcoming, and comfortable place, especially to those who have no other place – refugees, the homeless.

The conflict occurs when we only want to exercise one side of our responsibilities. If all we want is a comfortable place without going out into the world, then we are no longer a refuge, but a hiding place, a fortress shutting out the rest of the world. Or if all we do is go out and confront the troubles of the world, then we will soon burn out and exhaust ourselves. Maintaining both aspects of our calling requires sensitivity and integrity.

What gives us strength is that we are God's people – as 1st Peter says, we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. We are called to come together and to take strength and support from each other. To encourage each other. To accept each other. To comfort each other. To love one another. And our Lord Jesus, our way and our truth and our life, calls us to come to his table, to be fed with his life-giving food so that we may again be strengthened and enabled to leave this safe refuge and venture out again into the world as living stones.

It's not an easy time to be the church, and maybe it has never been an easy time to be the church. However, in the midst some of the challenges we are facing I see signs of hope springing up all over our church. We've heard about and seen some of these signs throughout this convention. Because of this, I'm really excited about the future of our church because I know that in the end it is God's church. As we heard in John 14 - *"Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."* We may not know for sure how things are going to turn out, but we know that with God they will be good.

My friends we are a people called to participate in God's mission to love and save the world. We are a people called to be a church In Mission for Others. And as 1st Peter reminds us we are a people called "in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light". We have gathered these last few days In Mission for Others: A People Called, but let us leave here today strengthened and recommitted to be a people sent as proclaimers of the Gospel and agents of healing, love and care in this world that God loves!

Amen!