

Faith Mennonite Church
April 27, 2008 ~ Easter 6

“Living Stones in the House of the Beloved”

I Peter 2:4-10; John 14:1-9a

A week ago Friday evening when a number of us were down at Prior Lake High School for Sam Bartel’s musical, Alisa Bardo-Martinson commented to me about how much Sam looks like Wolf. I replied, “He doesn’t just *look* like him, he *sounds* like him too! And it’s not just the voice tone, but the maturity as he speaks.” When I call the Bartel house and Sam answers, I can expect that, just like his father, he will begin with pleasantries, asking me how I’m doing and how things are going. Now that I’ve thoroughly embarrassed Sam, let me say that this is perfectly normal (and every parent’s dream!). We become like those we spend time with. A genetic connection helps, of course, but relationships shape us. And as we know, that shaping can cut two ways, which is precisely why parents care about the kind of company their children keep.

Our scriptures this morning, from 1st Peter 2 and John 14 are both concerned with this shaping. And both use the metaphor of home building and interior decorating to talk about how we are shaped into children of God.

Quite a number of us have purchased old houses that need some work. Not many of us have had the resources to simply bring in contractors and make all the improvements in one fell swoop. Some have saved money over a period of years as they’ve deliberated on a solution to a tricky floorplan. Others have gone with the 11-year plan, which Beth Richardson suggested to us when we ambitiously and a bit naively took a high-needs house under our wings. Some are professionally skilled to do home repair work, like Mark Kaufman and Mike Schrock was. Others of us learn along the way and hope we don’t make any costly errors – to the house or ourselves.

Many of us grow tired and get jealous of neighbors who spend their summer weekends at the lake instead of starting yet another house project. But along the way, we develop a love for our homes, satisfaction in the improvements we’ve made, and find that the bricks, mortar, boards, tile, drywall, fixtures and paint we’ve touched have been transformed from a house into a home. There’s character, security, warmth, and joy when friends stop in and family members return for a visit.

Turning a house into a home isn’t something that automatically happens or is guaranteed or quantified by the number of hours one spends on the job. We’ve all heard stories of couples building the state-of-the-art home or the wilderness get-away cabin only to see it go up on the market when their relationship sours. Turning a house into a home requires the same thing that raising children into mature adults requires: love, trusting relationships, and a long-term commitment.

And this is precisely what God was up to in the life of Jesus, and it was the particular emphasis of the evangelist who wrote the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John doesn't begin with a genealogy or an infancy narrative, but John takes us back to the beginning of creation and says that God is one who desires to communicate: In the beginning was the Word. God's very essence is relational, communicational. And the ultimate expression of that desire to relate and communicate was the act of incarnation, taking human form in order to fully communicate with humanity.

And how did that communication take place? Not through a prolific writer or a dynamic orator, but through one who lived the "way, the truth, and the life." Jesus communicated in words it is true, but rather than oratory he chose stories and pithy parables to uncover the truth, expose falsehood and hypocrisy, and call attention to and demand respect for the weak and powerless. He also communicated through actions: healing, comforting, feeding the crowd, washing the disciples' feet, showing the way of God's kingdom. And he communicated with his very life, not holding it back and protecting it, but offering it to God, fully confident that resting in the arms of God was a place of ultimate safety and delight – a place of many rooms.

Jesus message to the disciples in John 14 is this: you don't have to worry when I'm no longer with you. Everything you've seen me do, all the love that you've received from me, is a reflection of my Father, the one who loves you and me with a perfect love, the one who calls us beloved. God has a room for me and a room for you. God's house, God's love, is so very big that there are rooms for all of us. And if that's the case, we need not worry or fear, for we can never be separated from this love.

Peter had trouble comprehending this message at first. He acted out of fear, falling asleep and then denying Jesus in his most desperate hour. But when Jesus reappeared after his death, he embraced Peter with the same love he had always had for him, gently giving Peter the chance to affirm his love for Jesus—3 times in fact, as many times as he had denied Jesus.

Peter went on to share this love with others and to see himself as both a builder and also as one of the stones—the living stones—being built into the "Father's house" of many rooms. This house of love isn't just some place that's waiting for us when we die and leave this earth, it is a house that we are growing into right now as we follow Jesus. Just as we begin to sound and act like our human parents as we age, we also have the capacity, through God's grace present with us in the Holy Spirit, to embody the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus, to be built into God's spiritual house.

In our current context of religious pluralism, some of us struggle to understand the words that the evangelist in John attributes to Jesus: "No one comes to the Father but by me." For centuries, Christians have interpreted this as an exclusive claim: if one is not a Christian who believes in Jesus, one cannot enter heaven. But I'm not sure that is the focus of this passage. John's concern throughout the 4th Gospel is to demonstrate how a community maintains faith and passes it from one generation to another when none of the original witnesses of Jesus' life are any longer alive.

John's message is that Jesus continues to be present with and in his community through the Spirit. And the community continues the work of Jesus by developing the deeply relational spirituality that Jesus had with his followers and with the God he called Father. This is not so much about right belief as it is about following in the way, the truth, and the life that Jesus demonstrated. Our attitude toward persons of other religious faith and understanding should be the attitude we naturally have toward our children and the homes we are renovating – we want the best for them, we want them to experience the love we have known. We live our lives on their behalf, with the same generosity that God offers us in the home of beloved. And we trust that there is room for all.

Joetta Schlabach