

**The Rev. Stuart Seelman**  
**Sermon**  
**Sunday, May 7, 2023**

As the only male descendent in my immediate family, I've been getting incremental waves of hand-me-downs from the family's tool collection over the past half-decade or so. Usually they come not just as gifts but as homework assignments.

"Here's a weed whacker, you know what to do with it."

And so it was no surprise last time I went to my parents' house and my dad loaded up my car with a tub full of old woodworking equipment, used by my great grandfather.

"Y'know, these might be worth something. But don't you dare sell them. Fix 'em up and hold on to them." The homework was assigned.

I rifled through a box with chisels and marking gauges and combo squares. And as I sorted through the box of rusted saws a bit too carelessly, I realized that I didn't know when the last time was that I had received a tetanus shot.

But then I had to pause when I pulled out the hand planes—I wasn't familiar with these. Beveled blades positioned at an angle to stick out through a gap in sleds of wood and metal. *These had weight. There was mechanical precision, yes, but they were simple. Their purpose was clear but how one would actually use them skillfully didn't seem obvious.*

I dutifully soaked the tools in rust remover. Sanded and polished, degreased and re-oiled, sharpened, honed, stropped, and finished. And it's true they don't make 'em like they used to, because they were in pretty good shape on the other side, all things considered.

One problem, though, I had all these tools but no way to use them, and no easy place to store them.

So, what the heck. After all, I now had the tools to construct what I needed—the gift that keeps on giving. I found a design that seemed simple enough and took it upon myself to construct a workbench.

So if you were to walk by the manse in the evenings the past couple weeks, you might hear from the basement the blaring sound of some country hits that made me feel like a legit workman, and above that a less-rhythmic

SCREECH SCREEH SCREECH of those hand planes what-I-guess-you-could-call gliding along the surface of a 2x10 boards.

I was in over my head. And it was quite a workout. After many YouTube tutorials and a good bit of trial and error, sweat, and yes blood, but thankfully no tears, I gained a new appreciation for the words FLAT and SQUARE.

Because the workbench is the surface from which all other wood is flattened, it must be flat and square. \*So flat and square\* that dimensional lumber from the big box stores isn't even flat enough. Wood comes with twists and bends, that are only made worse as they're left out to dry.

And so you have to learn how to see what flat really is, to trust all sorts of measurements when your own eyesight can't suffice, and then to learn how to read the grain.

And you don't realize until you get to shaping and passing with the planer how few objects in our day to day life are truly flat.

Because even after the tree is cut down, wood has a life of its own. In changing seasons, it warps, contracts, and expands even after it's been flattened. You have to allow for that when you work with wood.

Now, this is downright biblical stuff. *Those who go on our annual trip to Maine with Mission at the Eastward know what I'm talking about*, because the Bible loves metaphors, especially those that have to do with building. For good reason.

And our reading from Peter's first letter is no different. After some metaphor about spiritual milk, it lingers on this metaphor of the spiritual house. Building a spiritual house. Christians who are strengthened into salvation find themselves built into a spiritual house.

But this house isn't made of twisting wood that takes a life its own, but instead it's made of stone. Living stone.

Now stone is not usually alive, so that doesn't make much sense at first read. And in fact, what makes it great for building is that it doesn't so quickly twist and bend. But nevertheless it says: come to him as a living stone. A chief cornerstone.

A cornerstone is the stone by which all others are aligned in the building process. It also needs to be flat and square. But \*this one\* has been rejected by the builders.

After all, it's even harder to get chisel stone flat and square. It would make sense to save yourself the work and throw out a stone that's totally aslant, especially for the cornerstone. But that still doesn't explain why or how \*this stone\* is living. Peter seems to be confusing the metaphor.

And then he confuses it again: now, it says that we are to "be a holy priesthood (in this spiritual house we were just built into as stones), to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Peter is writing to Gentiles who are beginning to face rejection for their faith. He's trying to offer encouragement, but they haven't grown up around the temple in Jerusalem. They probably remember what it's like to nurse as infants. Maybe a few of them are carpenters or stone masons, but they certainly don't have a basis of understanding for what it means to be a priest in Jerusalem, or what it means for a stone to be alive—maybe Peter could have chosen some more relatable metaphors.

Here we seem to find the problem with spiritual language, or language that's meant to provide comfort in despair: when we're given an otherworldly hope, what does this really have to do with day-to-day life? When it's not impractical, it might just be downright unrelatable.

Maybe spirituality, maybe what I'm doing up here, is just a performance of encouragement and easy answers. It might sound nice from those who've learned how to use it with skill and panache, but does it really mean anything substantive when we get right down to it? Will its comfort hold fast in and past our worst moments of pain and confusion?

Our faith should ground us, it should be the flat board from which our lives are fashioned. But these unrelatable mixed metaphors seem to challenge that notion. Because the Christian faith is complicated, twisting, if not a bit askew.

In this faith, we all disagree on any number of things, we don't come from the same place and we don't all live by the same rules, or even the same values.

Any simple heuristic or easy hope or answer for any question will come up short.

We can't ground ourselves in our brains and brilliance, or our consistency and hard work. We can't even ground ourselves in our ancestry or peoplehood, certainly not ourselves and our own choices and preferences.

And even Scripture, in bits like this, often leaves us with more questions than answers.

It's never easy to know if we're doing the right thing. We can't easily trust our own motivations. And the outcome we can observe is no easy source of comfort, either.

It might leave us looking like naive children, grounding our lives in something foolish or simple, or just giving up and settling for the hope we feel like we need but isn't backed up by anything sturdy.

So maybe this uncertainty and unrelatability of Peter's is by design, but how can it help us then? How encouraged can we really be?

It's here that Peter brings us back to the moment of belief. The moment we first tasted that the Lord is good. Like infants, he tells us to long for the pure spiritual milk so that we might grow into salvation.

At other points in the New Testament, we're told to no longer be children, "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine" and we're told that infants need milk but that we might be "mature, receiving solid food to distinguish between good from evil."

But in this case, spiritual milk is not doctrine, it's not a set of propositions or values to see what's flat and square. No, we are not the builders. And this isn't some unrelated throwaway metaphor. Instead, we're given a new way to see what it means for us to be truly alive, in and outside the house.

This life, this spiritual house of God, is otherworldly but it's also this-worldly in the fullest sense. Because we're brought to a living person. To Christ himself. Fully God and fully human.

To Christians, our flesh, what we can see is not the extent of what it means to be fully alive, aggravating as that might be. It twists and warps, but beneath it our spiritual life is ever more alive.

And our spiritual sacrifices are real, because to call us priests is just to say that God has chosen to bring us into God's presence.

And this life is really because like newborn infants we continue to nurse from God the Father's spiritual milk, the same which Christ is nourished from.

To be an infant in this case is to be at our most alive; to receive a gift of our lives as if it's new, so we can do our work in the simplest way: not builders making abstract measurements, but just people who cry out in dependence on God for life. And when we do that, we show everyone else how remarkable this life of mercy really is.

Because this is a new view of life, it's a new view of ourselves. One commenter described this passage as a "word-portrait of the church." Sometimes we need ourselves narrated back to us as God sees us: with mercy.

Maybe you've had others describe you in a way you didn't expect. There are moments when others see us with far more charity than we have for ourselves. They might look at us as having it all together when we feel like we don't.

It's a comfort and a gift, but this makes us feel apprehensive. They didn't see what it took. They don't appreciate how hard it is, how much sweat and toil took place, how much awkwardness and wasted time it took to get there. The twists and curves and bows and cups.

But God is a master builder, and we can trust this cornerstone to whom we're aligned. So, we can trust that the others are there for a reason, too.

The grain glistens, the rough edges are hewn, the mortar binds together those you'd never expect to see fit together.

Because God's house will not be built without us there, or anyone else. Because it's living, it's still under construction, and no material will go to waste. No people will be rejected.

In fact, to be witnesses, we continue to find our living cornerstone in those whom others reject. There, others might see only death, or even just laborious shaving and shaping. But there we find life. Because there we find other people who are also beloved and treasured by God.

And when we find ourselves there, all we have to do, the only work we can do, is witness to a moment of transformation.

This is a lifelong, painstaking process of growth and alignment, so much sweat and toil to proclaim a single moment of transformation.

But it's worth it to continue to say, to continue to live by the truth, the reality: God is here in the Spirit. And in Christ, God has defeated death. And this is only the foundation of something much bigger.

The work of our lives is to believe and live as if this is true, because it is.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, World Without End. Amen.