

Everyday as Community

1 Peter 1:22-2:8

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If you listen to the news you probably heard that in Quebec legislation was recently passed that makes it illegal for government employees to wear obvious religious symbols to work including turbans, burqas and crosses.

The goal is to make Quebec a province where a person's religion has no affect of the people around them. Now while this is the first legislation of its kind in Canada and is very controversial most Canadians agree religion should be a private affair.

How could this happen here? 50 years ago Christianity was in the center of Canadian society, the Lord's Prayer was said in schools and pretty much everyone went to church. Not so today, now we live in a country where Christ has been removed from the centre and very much pushed to the margins.

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[Pray]

Please open your Bibles or your phones – as it may be – to 1 Peter. If you are using a pew Bible you will find it on page 857...

1 Peter is a letter the Apostle Peter wrote to Christians who had been pushed to the very edges of the Roman Empire. These Christians had once lived beside neighbours very much like themselves, but now found that those they'd moved in next to were skeptical and even cynical towards them.

But in spite of this Peter encouraged them that living among people who are opposed to Christ – like we are today – is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact it is on the margins that Christians can experience the fullness of their faith right now as they stand together for Christ.

Last week we looked at the middle of chapter 1 and the first two imperatives, or commands that Peter says Christians are required to live out in response to what Christ has done within us. First, Christians are called to live fueled by a hope founded in the immanent return of Christ. In other words, we live the way we do because we know Christ is coming back. And second, because we know Christ is coming back we pursue holiness just like Jesus was holy. Not a holiness that makes us better than those around us, but a holiness that brings life to our neighbours.

This morning we are going to look at two more commands that Peter gives. But before we get there I want to jump forward to chapter 2 and verse 4 and then work backwards.

Chapter 2 verse 4:

[Read 1 Peter 2:4-8]

Now if you have been around the church for any period of time you have probably heard these words before because this passage teaches that all Christians are priests – in other words if you are a Christian here today you have just as much access to God as your pastor does. There is no difference between us. Now that is a really cool part of this text, but we aren't going to say any more about it.

But the second big thing this passage talks is that Christ is the cornerstone of our faith. And I want to look at what that means today.

If you are reading the NIV you will notice that verses 6-8 are indented which means they are a quotation from the Old Testament. In fact there are actually six Old Testament texts that are quoted here – we will look at two of them.

First Psalms 118; Now this was most likely written by David, the shepherd who became a king, and was the best king Israel ever had. During his reign David sought God, and God blessed him and the nation for it. Listen to David speak:

The LORD is with me; he is my helper.

I look in triumph on my enemies....

Open for me the gates of the righteous;

I will enter and give thanks to the LORD....

The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

the LORD has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes.

The LORD has done it this very day;

let us rejoice today and be glad. (Psalm 118:6-7;20-24)

So here commentators agree that David is praising God because God had taken him from obscurity and made him the cornerstone of Israel.¹

If you know the story of David he was the 8th son of Jesse. No one thought he would amount to anything. But God chose him and made him king. David was the stone the builders rejected that became the cornerstone.

And while this first talked about David, long after he was dead Israel kept looking at it and longing for a Messiah to come and take this prophecy for themselves and raise Israel to glory once again.

¹ See <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps118.htm>

But it wasn't just David or the Messiah that was seen as the cornerstone of Israel. Several hundred years later Isaiah used the same imagery to prophecy God's judgment and the coming Assyrian invasion. Look who the stone refers to here:

The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
 he is the one you are to fear,
 he is the one you are to dread.
 He will be a holy place;
 for both Israel and Judah he will be
a stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.
And for the people of Jerusalem he will be
a trap and a snare.
 Many of them will stumble;
 they will fall and be broken,
 they will be snared and captured." (Isaiah 8:13-15)

Yikes! Unlike Psalm 118 where the stone was David and then God's Messiah, here the stone is God Himself, the holy standard that Israel encountered and was punished by.

And in our text today these are the Old Testament passages that Peter takes and uses to refer to Christ. Now this is a big deal! And there are three things going on here.

First Peter says Yes Jesus is the Davidic Messiah. He is the righteous king who brings salvation to humanity. Sure He was born in a barn; yes He grew up in backwater Nazareth. But this is the Messiah we have been waiting for! That's the first thing.

But don't stop there Peter says. We thought the Messiah would be a man. He is that but He is also the Divine Judge that Isaiah talked about. He is the LORD Almighty with skin on living in our neighbourhood – that's who Jesus is.

At this point the people are amazed and they were getting excited. This kind of Messiah could be great!

They were picturing William Wallace from Braveheart – war paint and a big horse. A hero come to wipe oppression from the land. (Did you know that movie came out 18 years ago!)

But then Peter says in contrast to Wallace our Messiah doesn't actually wear face paint and kill bad guys. Instead He gathered a kingdom of 12 and then got crucified.

All of a sudden Peter's audience is a little less excited. That's not the kind of Messiah that people pushed to the margins dream about.

But this is what happened to Jesus. And the twist in the story is that this was God's plan from the beginning. It would be through Jesus' death that resurrection would come. That's the good news of the Gospel.

But here's the third thing, Peter says this good news also means we shouldn't expect anything less for ourselves. If our Messiah got pushed to the margins and rejected, it is going to happen to us too, and we have to be alright with this.

Sure the church in Canada used to enjoy a position of privilege, and that makes it a little painful for those who remember, but the margins is where Jesus lived! And so being pushed there by the culture around us is actually good for us. If we want to follow Jesus we need to embrace His humiliation as our own. Because when we embrace all that Jesus was, Peter says we become living stones just like Him, and are built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering sacrifices acceptable to God.

And that's what we were designed to do from the beginning – that is the best place for us to be.

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And that's our story. Christians follow Jesus through rejection to ultimate acceptance by God. But anybody who told you that would be easy was lying to you. In fact Peter says following Jesus is impossible to do by yourself, but luckily we were never required to do that.

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And here is where we look back to chapter 1 verse 22:

[Read 1 Peter 1:22-25]

Here we get Peter's next command for those who live in Christ. Verse 22 starts "Now that you have purified yourselves" or "Now that you have set yourselves apart as holy to God" It's time to start loving each other sincerely from the heart.

Peter's third command is that we love each other. And here he is talking specifically about loving the Christian brothers and sisters who are sitting beside you at church. We have to love these people... even the ones you don't like.

And Peter didn't make this up, Jesus said it first:

A new command I give you: Love one another (this language speaks of fellow followers of Jesus). As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone (outside) will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)

This is pretty clear. Jesus says if His children can love each other then the world around us will know its because of Him. Why? Because it is actually impossible to love unless you have encountered Jesus.

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Really? Is that true? Well, our culture has taken this word “love” and made it into something people make after hanging out for 3 days. But that’s not what love refers to in the Bible. Love in the Bible means to sacrifice yourself to build someone else up. And that kind of love is only possible when you’ve encountered Jesus.

Now I’ve been challenged by naturalists at this point – naturalists are people who believe that there is no God and we all evolved from some primordial gae stuck between the treads of somebody’s sneakers.

These naturalists have told me “we can love, we can give to charity and help the poor and the oppressed in our community just the same way you can – in fact we often do it better.”

But there is a huge inconsistency the naturalist’s argument here that I want to point out to you: When you are a naturalist you believe that nature is constantly evolving into something better by natural selection. And this means that you shouldn’t help the weak because if you do you contaminate the gene pool of the future.

So good naturalists should live completely for themselves and step on as many people around them as possible so that their genes get passed on while others don’t.

Sure naturalists can do nice things for others, but the real motivation for their niceness is not love, it’s self-preservation. The life they have right now is the only one they get. And so they can never love like Jesus because that would take them out of the gene pool and a naturalist could never do that to themselves.

And Peter talks about people like that in verse 23. He says they are born of perishable seed – there is no eternal future in the minds of these people. And then he quotes from Isaiah 40 where it talks about the fading glory of grass and flowers.

See people can build amazing kingdoms of grass – think the Roman Empire of the first century – but in the end a kingdom built without the love of Christ at the centre will not stand.

But there is an alternative, those who have been born of imperishable seed and have their hope set in the return of Christ can love selflessly because they live for a future beyond what they can see. And in so doing they can build a kingdom that will never pass away.

And Peter says, this is the reality if you are in Christ, so live it out. Start loving each other with the crazy-supernatural love that you have because of the imperishable seed you come from.

And Christians throughout history have been doing this. They've used their hard earned money to build hospitals and schools and orphanages and help the sick and dying even when that meant they got sick and died themselves.

And I believe Fort George is full of people who have been born of this imperishable seed. And the evidence you are part of this is you are living beyond yourself. You're volunteering your time to make Prince George a better place whether that is at Bible's for Missions or St. Vincent de Paul or the Civic Centre. You are talking people into your house who aren't part of your family or you're preparing meals for some random pastor and his wife who can't put their shoes on the right feet.

And this kind of love is possible Peter says, because you're born from imperishable seed.

But notice the main thing here. Loving like Christ is something that always involves other Christians. We don't live this life for Christ by ourselves. No matter what you feel like, you aren't the only imperishable seed or the only stone God is using to build His temple.

Here is where we get to the part about loving people we don't like.

"Great" you say. You obviously haven't been sitting in the pew I'm sitting in – if you had you would know that this guy beside me smells a little funny – that's why they call them pews.

And that lady over there, we all know she has a tendency to say nasty things behind our backs. I can endure church for an hour and a half a week but don't ask for more than that. I certainly wouldn't choose to live with these people.

Not so fast Peter says. If you are going to follow Christ, community with these smelly back-biters is not optional. If you are going to look like Jesus you must love them *because* Christ loved them. And here we get to his fourth command. Look at chapter 2 verse 1.

[Read 1 Peter 2:1-3]

In these verses we get the practical way that we can live out what Peter is talking about. And his words are directed at us, not the hard to love people beside us. We are the ones who are called to rid ourselves of community killing sins like malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander. And we do this because Peter says, we've "tasted that the Lord is good."

Peter says I know that there are lots of difficulties to community, but this is where you have experienced Jesus.

The reality is your encounter with Jesus didn't likely happen in your basement by yourself, and that's because an encounter with Jesus isn't something that just happens in your brain, it isn't an intellectual conclusion like the sum of a math problem – it's a relational experience.

Today more and more people are living their whole lives online. They do their working, their shopping, their playing, their dating and just about everything else without ever leaving their office.

But while the online world has all sorts of diversity to it, it is still only a two dimensional world. Something huge is lost when you can't smell or taste or touch what you're looking at. And so, for example, there is very little market for online wine tasting – some things have to be experienced first hand.

And in the same way if your Christianity is all about you and Jesus it is only a virtual copy of the real thing.

Personal devotions are great, but that's not Christianity. My wife can read that she is supposed to forgive 70 times 7 times, but she doesn't start looking like Jesus until her husband gives her the opportunity to act it out. That's what marriage is for – to make our spouses look like Jesus.... And that's what the church is for too.

And that's why Peter talks about an encounter with Christ that we can actually taste when we participate in Christian community with people who love Jesus like we do, but who we don't necessarily like.

And this community is what we call church. Now I'm not talking about the building, but the people of Christ gathered together; they are the ones who have tasted Jesus and can point those around them to where to find the feast.

And this encounter with Jesus through each other is so important that Peter says "now that you've tasted that the Lord is good" don't let anything keep you away from this. Instead "crave pure spiritual milk", so that by it you may grow up into your salvation."

And this is the fourth command – crave spiritual milk.

What is he talking about? What is this milk we are supposed to crave?

Now some people think this milk is the Word of God. Just get into your Bible and you will encounter Jesus. And that's good advice, but it doesn't fit with the context of what Peter is talking about here.

Instead, the thing that causes us to grow up in our salvation – which is our only option if we are going to be Christians by the way – is our life together. Christian Community is the source of life for Peter because this is where we encounter Jesus.

And we aren't called to endure it, we are called to crave it.

One thing I thought was funny when I first became a dad was the emphasis that health professionals put on not giving my infants anything to drink except milk. Not even water – at least not in any amount.

When I asked why I learned that when you are that little you don't have the ability to have anything less than ideal nutrition. Infants desperately need all the calories and protein that milk provides, and if they drink something else they can actually start to starve.

Peter says “now that you've tasted Christ, let this craving to experience Christ in the people around you grow – it's a good thing. In fact it is essential just like milk is essential for infants.

Now here I have faced two objections. First some people have objected that they can get Christian community in other places and church isn't that important – and part of these people say is true – there is nothing sacred about coming to the physical building called the church.

But don't make the mistake of confusing this building - which is optional with these people – who are not. Peter says if you want to follow Jesus you must do it with other people because you can't be built into a temple for God by yourself. If you are going to grow up in your salvation – if you are going to be built up like spiritual stones into God's temple, then you must do it within the milk of community. And we should crave this, in other words we should want more of it, not less of it.

The second objection I've heard comes from a confusion with Paul's word to the Corinthians where He says:

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. (1 Corinthians 3:2)

Doesn't this mean that milk is for the spiritually immature, and therefore Christian community might be for the immature as well?

Now it is true that the Corinthians couldn't handle the deeper things of Christ so Paul was stuck giving them basics, but while both Paul and Peter use milk as an illustration they are different illustrations. For Paul the alternative to milk is meat, and he is talking about immature faith verses mature faith, but for Peter the alternative to milk is starvation. And he is talking about tasting Jesus through community or not tasting Him at all. In Peter's illustration all Christians are infants in desperate need of the milk he talks about.

So Peter says if you've tasted that Jesus is good choose to love the people you find yourself in community with. Crave the milk of Christian community beyond everything else because this is where you encounter Jesus face to face.

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Christianity in our culture is something that is supposed to be private and not impact those who are around us. But the encounter with Christ that Peter talks about specifically requires that our faith be public. It is something that only exists when we are together as brothers and sisters. And then from there goes out and transforms the world.

And that means in a culture where we have been pressed to the margins we are going to have to stand up against the expected norm. Don't believe anyone who tells you that you can be a Christian by yourself in a way that isn't affected or doesn't affect those around you. And together we must not let the world outside tell us to keep our faith to ourselves. We are those who have tasted that Jesus is good and this experience is one that can't be kept to ourselves.