

**MAUSOLEUM, MUSEUM, MÊLÉE, OR MINISTRY**  
**A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH**  
**SEPTEMBER 16, 2007**  
**THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—I PETER 2:1-10**  
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**W**ell, as you know, we were going to dedicate the new building this morning but decided to wait till it was a little more presentable. Still, I'm bound and determined to dedicate *something* today, so we'll dedicate not only the carillon but our ministry. The Church, after all is not a building but a ministry, so I'll continue the enterprise Kibbie began last week by dedicating the *ministry*, if not yet the *facility*, of the First Presbyterian Church of Greenwich, Connecticut. And to do that, I've chosen one of the most beloved texts of the New Testament—about building up the Church of Christ with living stones.

So, what do you know about the First Letter of Peter in the New Testament? That's okay, biblical scholars don't know much about it either. It purports, of course, to come from the mind, heart, and hand of the Apostle Peter himself. "From Peter," says the letter's first line. Many New Testament scholars doubt that attribution, however, because the letter is so very Greek. It has some of the most elegant Greek grammar and style in the New Testament and some scholars wonder how a Galilean fisherman learned to write like Paul and Plato; most Galilean fishermen didn't know how to read or write at all. So it's possible that the early Church signed Peter's name to this letter, rather than the gifted but anonymous and uncredentialed craftsman who actually wrote it, so that readers would really pay attention to it. You know what they say: things sound a lot truer if you tell people Winston Churchill said it first.

On the other hand, this letter *sounds* like the advice of the Chief Apostle and First Pope, and, after all, the author admits at the end of the letter that he wrote it with the help of a secretary or ghost writer named Silvanus, so for the sake of argument, let's say this letter of polished style and pointed advice

really did come from the *heart* and *mind* of Peter the Galilean fisherman, but from the *hand* of secretary Silvanus, and in fact bears the same relationship to its author as a presidential speech bears to the President who delivers it. You really think George Bush wrote the speech he gave the other day? Bill Moyers wrote LBJ's speeches; that's why they were so good. Perhaps Peter dictated his thoughts in rough fisherman Aramaic, and Silvanus buffed them to the high sheen of this polished Greek.

And listen to all the masonry images in that passage I read a moment ago: "Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built up into a spiritual house." Some version of the word 'stone' appears eight times in five verses, so is it too far-fetched to suggest that all these masonry metaphors sprung from the anointed imagination of the fisherman-disciple Jesus predicted would be the Rock on which the Church was founded? I think maybe they did.

There were times in his early discipleship career of course when Peter acted dumber than a box of rocks, but Peter and God made sure all that was behind him and he did indeed become the Rock on which the Church was founded and the spiritual source of all subsequent Christian leadership and apostolic power.

What Peter wants to say here is that three kinds of stones go into the building up of a spiritual house. Jesus is the cornerstone, committed apostolic leadership the keystone, and vital Christians themselves the secure walls that keep the storms out and the gathered faithful within. Without that cornerstone the walls fall *down*, and without the keystone the walls fall *in*, and without the walls themselves

there's nothing there at all. Jesus the corner, Peter and his successors the key, we the strong, stable, living walls.

There are lots of things you can do with stones. You can build mausoleums with them. That's what some churches do, of course. They start off strong and dynamic and exciting and the crowds pile in and the whole enterprise seems an everlasting triumph but then the ever-shifting world races past them and the young people flock to nimbler institutions and so the old faithful turn instead to the task of embalming a deceased past. One church consultant tells of being called to a declining church in a changing neighborhood, and when he informed the congregation that it was facing a changing environment and would have to alter everything about its ministry in order to attract younger people to the church, one woman said to him, "Why can't you just leave us alone until we die, and then change the church if you want to?"<sup>1</sup> Why can't you just leave us alone, God? Why do we have to change to keep up with this hurrying world?

Last Sunday I worshiped in a church with a beautiful old barn of a sanctuary, and the worship leaders were even more beautiful; they were movie stars: Brad Pitt and George Clooney, or at least just as charming and funny; I thought it was *Ocean's 13*. The sermon was powerful and the prayer was moving but nobody else showed up. You could cram 800 people into that reverential old cavern but only twenty-two 80-somethings showed up, and even *they* didn't really show up. They wouldn't laugh at the jokes or cry at the sad stories; they left their brains and hearts at home and showed up just for show, apparently. There hasn't been that much flat affect and silent expressionlessness in the same place since Tommy Lee Jones and Al Gore shared a dorm room at Harvard in 1968. The whole thing smelled like death.

There are many things you can do with stones. You can build a mausoleum or establish a museum.

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<sup>1</sup>Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 25

A while back I learned about a conference at Hartford Theological Seminary called "Church Growth for the Liberal Congregation." Well, I'd never heard of such a thing. I thought "Church Growth for the Liberal Congregation" was an oxymoron. I don't know too many growing liberal churches. Liberal churches have fewer evangelism tools than conservative congregations. Liberal churches don't tell you you're going to hell if you don't attend church and liberal churches don't tell you they have a monopoly on the truth. Those are powerful evangelism tools, but they're not available to Liberal congregations. 'Liberal church growth' is almost an oxymoron. So I grabbed Judy Kelly, our Elder for Membership and I said, "Judy, let's go; let's find out what this is all about."

I'm not sure we learned anything positive we didn't already know, but we did learn a little something from negative example. The Reverend Benjamin Watts of Hartford told us about visiting a church in south Philadelphia called the Tindley Temple. Tindley Temple had been a storefront church called Bainbridge Street Methodist until a compelling 6' 2", ramrod straight, singing preacher named Charles Albert Tindley got hold of it and turned it into the prototype for the modern mega-church. Tindley was born in 1851 into abject poverty on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and came to Bainbridge Street as its janitor, but taught himself Greek and Hebrew, laid his broom aside, took up his Bible instead, and started preaching the sermons.

And the people started coming. In 1924 Bainbridge Methodist built a new 3200-seat sanctuary with twelve doors or gates just like the city of Jerusalem itself and renamed it Tindley Temple. It had a magnificent pipe organ at the very center of the structure, with four manuals, trumpets all along the back wall, and pipes lining every flat surface of the church. It costs \$100,000 a year just to maintain the organ. Ben Watts says that the church itself was an instrument. Tindley, you see, was not just a compelling preacher but a master musician as well. He is sometimes called the Father of Gospel Music. He composed the famous civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome," and also the spiritual precursor to that great popular song

“Stand By Me,” paraphrased from Charles Albert Tindley by Ben E. King. Part of Tindley’s version is printed at the beginning of the bulletin. To learn just how far American culture has shifted in the last fifty years just notice that where once we used to sing “Stand By Me” to God, now we sing it to our ‘darlin’s’.

When Charles Albert Tindley was preaching at Tindley Temple you had to show up by 9:30 for the 11:00 service or you didn’t get a seat. On Christmas Eve, people started arriving in the morning for the evening service to hear Tindley preach the same sermon every Christmas: “Heaven’s Christmas Tree.” That church was a movement. Tindley Temple, they called it, after their beloved pastor. But you should never name your church after a living person, because even great people die. Today, in that 3200-seat sanctuary, there are a few folks scattered around the cavernous reverence. Tindley is long gone, but they preserved his office as a museum. His books and glasses are lying on his desk from 75 years ago as if he were still among us. They haven’t done a thing to change since Tindley died.<sup>2</sup> You start with a movement, then when the movement wanes you encase the ossifying past behind plexiglass in a museum, and the next step is the mausoleum. That is the natural progression of things: first an exciting dynamism, then a nostalgia for a precious but long-gone past, and finally a slow dying. Unless you do something to keep up with the world.

Do we have the faith, the voice, the sanctified imagination to preach and teach and share and live a Gospel so compelling that our friends and neighbors will have no choice but to come and find out what we’re doing here?

There are a lot of things you can do with stones. You can build a mausoleum, establish a museum, or launch a *mêlée*. My dictionary defines ‘*mêlée*’ as “a hand-to-hand fight among several people,” or “a confused struggle.” Does it sometimes seem as

if the Christian Church often uses its stones primarily to launch a *mêlée*? Does anybody here feel as if you’re in the middle of one just now? I don’t have time to talk about this. Just let me say, through a bullhorn if I had one, and Don Hibbard will get me one if I need it, “Drop the stones and move slowly away.” We’ve been through so much together, and we’ve accomplished so many things for God, and we’ve made so many hard decisions, and some of them you think are really inane, but good people are doing their best to serve God, there are no heathens or pagans or scoundrels or villains sitting next to you in the pew, and in God’s good time, by God’s good grace, through God’s ever-present Spirit, to God’s good purpose, we’ll get there in the end, if we can patiently wait for God. Let’s not use our stones to launch a *mêlée*.

There are many things you can do with stones. You can build a mausoleum, establish a museum, launch a *mêlée*, or enable a ministry. What ministry is our sanctified imagination calling us to accomplish for God and for God’s world.

Alfred North Whitehead said: “The worship of God is not a rule of safety—it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable. The death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure.”<sup>3</sup> Yes?

I can still see the smoke-blackened stones of my friend’s somewhat beaten-up church in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Norristown is the county seat of Montgomery County, PA., but it’s a little bit rough around the edges, kind of a smokestack, blue-collar city, you could call it a rust-bucket town. They used to speak German there but now I suspect they speak mostly Spanish and hip-hop. Maybe it’s revived a bit since I was there 20 years ago, but back then my friend’s church was in one of the rougher neighborhoods, and she and her elders decided they needed to do something to serve the community.

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<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Watts, “Church Growth for Liberal Churches,” a conference at Hartford Theological Seminary, Hartford, CT., November 2, 2006.

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<sup>3</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Science & the Modern World* (New York: MacMillan, 1926), quoted by W. H. Willimon, *The Service of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), pp. 66-67.

They wanted to get the kids off the street, so they threw dances on Friday nights with a DJ. Anybody could come and everybody did, hundreds of them, of all colors and stations in life. Those dances were events. This church's neighbors were all bars and taverns, and pretty soon the neighbors were calling the church to complain about all the kids in the neighborhood. "You're bringing in the wrong element," said the bars to the church. So far as I know, it was the first time in history a bar called a church to complain that they were attracting the lowlifes to the neighborhood. I think maybe she was doing something right, because the death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure.

Have you read Wendell Berry's lovely little novel about Jayber Crow, a young man who dreams of becoming a Christian minister but then for various reasons abandons that calling and becomes instead the local barber in the small town of Port William, Kentucky? From that humble vantage point he ends up doing more ministry as a barber than he ever would have as a pastor. Besides cutting hair he's the janitor in the local church too. One day midweek after cleaning up the sanctuary he lays down on the floor behind the back pew to take a nap, and he has a dream, or a vision, or something, and he says:

Waking or sleeping (I couldn't tell which), I saw all the people gathered there who had ever been there. I saw them as I had seen them from the back pew, where I sat with Uncle Othy (who would not come in any farther) while Aunt Cordie sang in the choir, and I saw them as I had seen them (from the back pew) on the Sunday before. I saw them in all the times past and to come, all somehow there in their own time and in all time and in no time: the cheerfully working and singing women, the men quiet or reluctant or shy, the weary, the troubled in spirit, the sick, the lame, the desperate, the dying, the little children tucked into the pews beside their el-

ders, the young married couples full of visions, the old men with their dreams, the parents proud of their children, the grandparents with tears in their eyes, the pairs of young lovers attentive only to each other on the edge of the world, the grieving widows and widowers, the mothers and fathers of children newly dead, the proud, the humble, the attentive, the distracted—I saw them all. I saw the creases crisscrossed on the backs of the men's necks, their work-thickened hands, the Sunday dresses faded with washing. They were just there. *They* said nothing, and *I* said nothing. I seemed to love them all with a love that was mine merely because it included me. When I came to myself again, my face was wet with tears.<sup>4</sup>

I think that's just Wendell Berry's way of saying what St. Peter the Rock said so many years before:

Come to him, the living stone, chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built up into a spiritual house...for 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 the one who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people. Once you had received no mercy, but now you have received mercy.

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<sup>4</sup>Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself* (Washington, D.C., 2000), p. 164-165.