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“Chosen to be Built” GPPC 5-14-17
Psalm 31, Isaiah 58:6-9a, 1 Peter 2:2-10

With another congregation many years ago, my wife, Beth, and I helped lead a youth mission trip to West Virginia. Now there are few things in life more fun *and* more nerve-wracking than taking church kids on a trip. I love the energy and excitement, but I’m also utterly relieved when the trip is over. We’ve pulled into the church parking lot. The youth have done ministry, had a spiritual experience, and nobody has gotten seriously injured in the process.

We had a good sized group that went to West Virginia, maybe 15 youth plus several adult chaperones. Some of the kids were more involved in the church than others, and some were, shall we say more spirited than the others.

On the way to our destination, a Presbyterian church in a little West Virginia town out in the sticks, we stopped for lunch and a visit to Walmart. Those of you who’ve chaperoned youth trips or taught school know that a trip to Walmart with 15 youth might present a challenge. It did.

Jeff Paschal

We got out of the vans and turned the kids loose at Walmart. Some of them ran to those coin-operated mechanical horses outside the store and started riding. Woohoo! Then they went into Walmart and started taking pictures of each other with various items. Security personnel at Walmart do not like it when you do that. And they kindly asked the kids to stop, which they did.

At last we went to the front of the store to pay for our items. I was feeling thankful that nobody had gotten kicked out of the store. The last kid to pay for his items was Steve, a basketball player, six-feet something tall. Steve paid for his stuff and then gave the clerk, an older woman, a big kiss on the cheek. Instead of calling security, she laughed, said, “Oh, stop!” and shooed him out the door.

God is good.

During that trip, we built Habitat Houses, worked at a school for disadvantaged children—great stuff. And then we had an unusual assignment. We helped build a church. There was a female pastor for a small non-denominational church. And her church building was being constructed over many years. Whenever enough money would come in

Jeff Paschal

and she had volunteers, such as our youth group, a little bit more would be built. We put in some downspouts and some insulation while we were there. But who knows how long it might take to build that church? 10 years? 20 years? Who knows?

You never know how long it might take to build a church.

The writer of 1 Peter speaks to a church that is being built under some duress. One scholar says, "...1 Peter is a general letter, probably written from Rome around the end of the first century, by follower(s) of the apostle Peter, who wished to convey to besieged gentile Christians in Asia Minor the encouragement and comfort contained in the gospel Peter preached during his years as a missionary..." (Paul Achtemeier, in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 1279.)

The writer of 1 Peter says, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."

What's his argument here? He is saying being a new Christian is like being a newborn baby—it's a totally new life and it's a life we grow into. We start out as beginners, drinking pure, spiritual milk. And then

Jeff Paschal

we grow into salvation and we grow up in our understandings and commitment.

A pastor says, “There is always some trial and error when a new mother learns to breastfeed her newborn. A mom has to be relaxed enough for the milk to flow. A mom has to be attentive enough to help the baby latch on. A mom has to have taken care of herself with food and drink enough to produce the milk. On the baby’s side, some learning has to happen as well. The baby has a natural inclination to search for the breast. Babies still need help to find the right place, suck hard enough for the milk to let down, and not wear themselves out in the effort. In the first week of life, mother and child have to work together to find a rhythm that will make this work. The miracle is that both mother and child ‘know’ at some deep level how to do this. Their DNA has been hardwired for sustaining life.” (Joy Douglass Strome in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, 462.*)

Our confirmands especially, but in many ways, *all* of us who have been called as followers of Christ know this hunger to be fed and grow in our faith. If we have indeed “tasted that the Lord is good,” then, like a

Jeff Paschal

newborn searching for her mother's milk, we will *want* to be nourished by the things that help us grow as Christians, won't we?

There are what we might call the "inner" spiritual disciplines—prayer, study of scripture, worship, Sabbath rest, meditation, and so on. And then there are what we might call the "outer" spiritual disciplines—fellowship with other Christians, "hands on" service for others (sometimes called mission), and advocacy for God's justice in the larger systems of the world (sometimes called social justice). We need both the inner disciplines *and* the outer disciplines to be in balance as Christians, don't we? Without the inner disciplines, we tend to become shrill and arrogant. Without the outer disciplines, we tend to become complacent about the suffering and needy people that Jesus commanded us to care for. Both inner disciplines and outer disciplines are needed for growth. But what are we growing toward anyway?

The writer of 1 Peter says "chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house..." Notice two things. First, we don't just decide to become followers of Christ. In the mystery of God we are actually chosen by God for this responsibility

Jeff Paschal

and this privilege. Second, note that the writer says “*let* yourselves be built into a spiritual house.” We don’t do the building. God does it *to* us and in us. So we should never be proud about our growth as Christians. At the most, we might say, “I allowed God to help me grow,” and even then maybe we have claimed too much for ourselves.

But we are chosen to be built into a spiritual house, a kind of living temple in which God dwells and works. And works for what? Some Christians would have us believe God’s main purpose for us here on earth is just to transport each Christian to heaven. So every Sunday the question asked of the worshiping congregation is, “Are you saved? Are you sure you’re saved?”

But that’s not really the emphasis of the Bible or Jesus or our faith, is it? Continuing to worry about whether we are “saved” or not feels as though we are not trusting God’s love very well and we’re focusing too much on ourselves. So what are we chosen to be built for?

According to the writer we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that [we] may proclaim the

Jeff Paschal

mighty acts of [God] who called [us] out of darkness into [God's] marvelous light.”

We're chosen to proclaim the mighty acts of God. And we do that with the words we speak and with the things we do. The world outside asks, “Who is this God whose acts are so mighty?” And the church answers, “Well, let me *tell* you.” The world asks, “Who is this God whose acts are so mighty?” And the church says, “Well, let me *show* you.”

Marj Carpenter served as a reporter, then as director of the Presbyterian News Service, and eventually as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). She says, “The Presbyterians have opened more mission fields than any other church in history.” Where there has been poverty, suffering, injustice, and hunger, again and again Presbyterians have responded and we have responded with generosity declaring the mighty acts of God.

Carpenter talks about going to Ethiopia in 1984 when there was a horrible famine that killed about a million people. Carpenter went with a hunger relief group to see what was happening. At one point she says, “I

Jeff Paschal

stood in a cavelike room full of young mothers, and children, and babies. They had given the young mothers orange cups of powdered milk to drink while they were telling them how they were going to issue food to them to take back to their villages...I stood there and wondered why I was so bothered. As a reporter I had covered murder scenes, train wrecks, plane crashes, car accidents, and a lot of other terrible things, and yet I was weeping. I finally realized it was because of the silence. There is nothing in God's world more terrible than a room full of babies too weak to cry, babies so weak they only make mewling sounds." (Marj Carpenter, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 61-62.)

Marj says after that experience it never bothers her to hear a baby cry in worship again.

And it never bothers me either.

And I consider it a great privilege as a follower of Christ to write letters to our elected representatives so that people don't go hungry or even starve to death.

I've lost touch with some of the youth who went on that mission trip to West Virginia so long ago, but others I know about. One has

Jeff Paschal

become a psychiatrist. One is in business. One works in hotel management. Some are stay-at-home parents. One is pursuing a Ph.D. in education. One is a Presbyterian pastor. One is a teacher. One works in security. They are people motivated by their Christian faith. They are people who tell about the mighty acts of God.

You never know how long it takes to build a church. Who knows what God will do with the youth being confirmed today? Who knows what God will do with people, of all ages, who have tasted that God is good and who are hungry to grow in their faith? Who knows what God will do?

So let the babies cry. Let them drink. And let them grow.

Because you never know how long it takes to build a church.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal