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The World of 1 Peter and Us:

3. Once You Were....

1 Peter 2:2-10 Common English Bible ...like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation, 3 since you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. 5 You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 Thus it is written in scripture, Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed. 7 So God honors you who believe. For those who refuse to believe, though, the stone the builders tossed aside has become the capstone. 8 This is a stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall. Because they refuse to believe in the word, they stumble. Indeed, this is the end to which they were appointed. 9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. 10 Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

My parents used to tell a rather embarrassing story about one of their trips to the grocery store many, many years ago. It was the very end of the month -- the time when you are waiting for payday and only have a few dollars left in the checking account and hoping that it's enough to cover the mistakes you might have made subtracting, and that the checks you've floated don't come back too soon. This was back in the day when you could actually float checks, and, come to think of it, when people actually used checks. Debit cards were not even dreamed of. One of my brothers was about four years old, and my youngest brother was just a few months old. And he needed more formula -- infants, for some reason, simply aren't able to understand that tomorrow is payday. And so my mother and father rounded up a few returnable bottles (remember those?), checked the sofa for any quarters that might have escaped, raided the car's ashtray for loose change, raided (I only found out years later) MY piggy bank, and then my mother headed for the store with both the baby and the four-year-old in

tow.

Well, the store was crowded, but she finally got the formula, and then, as she was passing by the dairy section on the way to the checkout -- it happened. The four-year-old, who was always a very skinny kid, stopped there in front of the milk bottles (remember those?), spindly little legs sticking out of his shorts, dirty from having played outside all day, and, in the loudest and most pitiful voice possible, said this: *"Mommy, can I have some milk too? I haven't had any milk in such a long time."* All around the dairy aisle, conversation came to a dead stop -- and a dozen pairs of eyes were on my mother and this pathetic little boy. And, if looks could kill, then my mother would have been dead on the spot, there among the cheese and butter and the eggs and the milk in the Ft. Worth, Texas, PigglyWiggly supermarket.

These are, of course, the sort of times when one re-evaluates the whole idea of the joys of parenthood. And yet, in its own way, my brother's whine, there in the dairy section, is remarkably like our cries sometimes. For we too, on occasion, so to speak, crave milk -- there are times that we too crave something that is simple and nourishing, we crave something that is satisfying and un-complex. For there are times when it seems like it's been awhile since **we** have had milk either. We find it hard to remember when life was simpler -- we get grown up and we deal with jobs or the lack of jobs, we deal with crises among our families, we watch our friends go through difficult times, we feel our lives and our pocketbooks controlled by forces that are mysterious and faraway and most certainly very complex, we are anxious for our country, we're tired of far-off wars and the prospects of war and religious and ethnic hatreds that both puzzle and scare us, we worry whether we can pay for our health care, we worry whether we will outlive our money, we fear we might become a burden to our children. And we remember (or at least we think we remember) that simple long-ago childhood feeling of being loved and feeling secure; we may remember singing "Jesus Loves Me" and it was

enough, it was enough. We remember (or think we remember) when life and society and families and values were all so much simpler.

And we sometimes desperately wish it were all so simple again. We crave a simple answer. We crave a simple theology. We crave a simple God who will give us what we want and leave us satisfied. We want milk and we want a life where milk will be all that it takes to make everything ok.

In the face of such desires, our scripture this morning from I Peter – which also speaks of milk – seems quite apt. Milk is an appropriate symbol here, for this section of the scripture is in fact a set of instructions given to those who were newly baptized, brand new converts to the faith. They are a kind of summary, a set of "operating instructions" summing up what the Christian life is about. Put another way, these lines from I Peter are the record of what was said to those who were in one of the very first "Pastor's Classes" or confirmation classes. And keep something very important in mind: in the church of the year 80 or 90, in small-town Turkey, these were not primarily youth or children being addressed, but adults. People were not born and reared in the church as they often are now. No, most of these were folks who had decided, as **adults**, after following other guides and other gods, to come into the church and be baptized. And as we have seen the last two Sundays, they sometimes suffered for their newfound allegiance to Christ; their friends and family may have ridiculed and ostracized them and local government officials periodically pursued them for persecution. What do such folks in such a situation need? Well, it might be said that they are "babes in the faith." And what babies need is milk. What babies need is simple nourishment. What these new converts need is a simple Gospel which can claim them and feed them here at the very beginning of their journey.

And yet.... You and I know how both irritating and charming new converts to anything can be. Whether it is to religion, or to quitting smoking, or to a new diet plan,

those who are new converts to **anything** are usually possessed of boundless enthusiasm, a powerful belief in a few simple answers, and a sense of certainty that is unshakeable. Such new converts also tend to be rather self-absorbed. They tend to use the word "**me**" alot; they tend to think that they have the only right perspective on things. But there is also a certain enviable charm about such folks too: this hope and belief and enthusiasm of the new convert -- whether it's a conversion to stopping smoking, or losing weight, or even to a new religion -- is wonderful to watch -- *for awhile*. Their belief that things are really quite simple is charming in a way -- *for awhile*. Their absolute certainty about simplicity can even be beguiling --*for awhile*.

Now, simplicity is a good thing sometimes. I wish there were more of it. I wish, for example, that the electronic gadgetry that is now so much a part of my life were less complex, for contrary to what one computer manufacturer claims, it too often, and too maddeningly, doesn't "Just Work." I wish my cell phone bill were simpler; it seems, though to be written in a very complex, non-human language. I am glad that certain things **are** simple. There is a simple joy in watching the spring flowers unfold in the unceasing rhythm of the seasons and the mama birds building their nests, and the simple majesty of gazing at Pikes Peak. There is simple joy in the giggle of a three-year old, in holding the seasoned and life-giving hand of a senior citizen, in gathering for worship and singing songs old and new and being with those who give us life. Simple joys indeed. And, indeed, as the old and beautiful Shaker hymn says "Tis a gift to be simple."

But sometimes simplicity is not good. Sometimes it can be misleading. Sometimes it can be downright dangerous. And while the Shaker hymn is true, it is just as true that it is **not** a gift to be **over**-simple. In fact, ***oversimplification of the faith is one of the sins of our time***, one of the temptations of our age. It is also an old problem, as the 1 Peter's letter realizes. For while he offers simple nourishment for

these new converts, he also knows that in the long run it will not be enough. For the problem for any new convert is the problem of trying, for the long haul, to subsist only on milk, of trying to make a world which is undeniably complex fit into the mold of a perspective that's too simple. Because, you see, eventually milk just isn't enough by itself anymore. Simple answers aren't quite enough all by themselves for those who seek to grow their faith. For just like the infant, whose digestive system soon demands something more substantial than milk, the new convert will also soon end up needing something more than, as 1 Peter puts it, "pure spiritual milk," something more than the simple conviction that "God loves me and therefore everything must be ok." For to grow up, to mature in life and faith, is to find out, slowly but very surely, that everything is not always ok; it is to find out that complexity lurks everywhere, that most of life is painted in shades of gray, that people can be both bad and good, and that good people get hurt and God is no magician!

And yet if the **only** thing we have are our milk cartons, if **all** we have are collections of simple slogans, then you and I will be increasingly unable to deal with the world. For what once worked will not work anymore. It will not satisfy. It will not nourish. And when that happens, we may be -- to put it plainly -- increasingly unable to find God. We will be increasingly unable to sustain the early enthusiasms of the life of faith. The milk of simple answers that earlier sustained us will now seem inadequate. A generation before the time of 1 Peter, the apostle Paul saw the very same thing: He told the church at Corinth that at the beginning he had *"fed [them] with milk, not solid food, for [they] were not ready for it"* (1 Corinthians 3:2).

So what is the "solid food" of the faith that we proclaim? What is the appropriate diet for a Christian that will be able to really fit us for our journey as Christians and not leave us malnourished through oversimplification? What over-simplistic formulations must we avoid if we are to continue to, as Paul puts it, "grow up in every way"?

(Ephesians 4:15) 1 Peter's instructions in our scripture are chock-full of metaphors, did you notice that? In the space of a few short verses he talks about stones – living stones, cornerstones, capstones. He uses the images and metaphors of priesthood and holy nation and rocks that make you stumble and light and darkness. But where he ends up is a fitting place for us to also end up, and it's a fitting remembrance for Mother's Day. It's a simple formulation but not an over-simplistic one; here his closing words again: *"Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy."* Eugene Petersen's translation of this verse in The Message is striking: "...you are the ones chosen by God.... to tell others of the night-and-day difference [God] made for you—from nothing to something..." *From nothing to something. From nothing to something.* That may be the deepest human desire in a nutshell, to know that we are significant, to know that we matter, to know that in the scheme of things we count. I have every reason to think that those same questions were being asked by those new converts to whom 1 Peter was writing – when all is said and done, you can imagine them asking, when all of the jumble of metaphors are perused and parsed, *"What, Peter, is the thing that is most significant about this new God we have chosen to follow?"* And the answer: You have received mercy. Mercy.

There is so very much in our lives, in our culture, in our world that would tell us otherwise. And I am intrigued that mercy is the ultimate gift from God that 1 Peter picks out to say what it means to be a child of God, a follower of Christ. He didn't say strength. He didn't say power. He didn't say eloquence. He didn't say good looks. He didn't say money. He didn't say any of the things that so very often the world uses as its yardstick to measure whether you measure up. He said "You have received mercy." You have received mercy from a God who is, when all is said and done, mighty in mercifulness, "pure unbounded love," as the hymn says. The wonderful writer Ann

Lamott, writing about Mother's Day, says this about such love:

The main thing that ever helped mothers was other people mothering them; a chain of mothering that keeps the whole shebang afloat. I am the woman I grew to be partly... because of the extraordinary love of [my mother's] best friends, and my own best friends' mothers, and from surrogates, many of whom were not women at all but gay men. I have loved them my entire life, even after their passing.¹

On this and every day, 1 Peter tells you that, in the end, you matter, you count, you are forever significant not because of what you do or don't do, what you have or don't have, what you say or don't say. All of these things matter, but they don't **ultimately** matter. No, what matters is that you are loved by a God of mercy and you are called therefore to extend and enhance that love, that mercy, in the face of a world that will sometimes laugh at your seeming naivete, that will sometimes continue to put its trust in the powers of violence, that will too often praise mendacious men for reasons at odds with the gospel. No, 1 Peter says, and Ann Lamott echoes, it is a chain of love, the mothering love of God, that keeps the "whole shebang afloat." *For "Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy..."*

My little brother got his milk that day long ago. My mother and my father could always be trusted – even in those months when there was far more month than money – to make sure we were given what we needed for our lives even when that meant sacrificing what they wanted. And God, in Her infinite mothering mercy, can always be trusted to give **us** what **we** need for the journey, to give **us** what **we** need to nourish us, to give **us** what **we** need so that complexity and ambiguity and the temptation to oversimplification will never defeat us or enslave us. That is the Good News for this day, the news that we can go forth and sing and shout: for now we have received mercy

¹https://www.salon.com/2010/05/08/hate_mothers_day_anne_lamott/

and it has made all the difference, all the difference. Thanks be to God! Amen.