

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Cycle A

April 20, 2008

Readings: Acts 6:1-7; 1 Peter 2:4-9; John 14:1-12

Living, but Imperfect, Stones

Last week we had the image of Jesus as Shepherd and as the gate of the sheepfold. This morning we hear about Jesus as the cornerstone and as the way, the truth, and the life. Last week we were the sheep of the flock; we were contained within the sheepfold that represents the Church. But this morning we are not called to be passive members of a flock; we are called to be more. We are called to be building blocks, living stones, to build up the Church itself.

Back in the summer of 2002, Jenni and I and two of our daughters went on a mission trip to Bolivia to help build a school. Our first part of the project was pouring the remainder of the floor for the second story of the school. And we quickly learned that building methods were a little different down there. We didn't have a cement truck, or even a mixer, for preparing the concrete. Alejandro, our foreman, who didn't speak English, pointed to the wheelbarrow and then to the pile of cement bags at the other end of the property. I got the message. Now, I have difficulty with our standard size bags of cement here in the States which are 80 pounds; but theirs are 50 kilograms which translates to 110 pounds. And then after a few more trips for sand, we hauled water in five gallon buckets. And we mixed the pile of ingredients together on the ground working as a team using shovels and hoes. Of course we always needed *mas agua*, more water, and when the consistency seemed about right to us, Alejandro would shake his head, point to the water bucket, and say *uni mas*, one more bucket of water. And after each batch of concrete was mixed, we formed a bucket brigade with people standing on ladders and scaffolds at different heights and we passed the wet cement up to the second floor one bucket after another. As each bucket changed hands it was accompanied by the cry of *balde* which is simply the Spanish word for bucket.

As the cement dried and cured, the load of bricks for the walls of the second floor was delivered. Of course we had the opportunity to help unload the bricks and throw them up to the second floor and stack them. And this is when I noticed that the bricks were still warm. After questions through an interpreter, I determined that the bricks were made about an hour away and were still warm from coming out of the kiln. It was definitely an occasion for a field trip to see how the bricks were made. We found a young boy there, about 14, mixing mud and straw with his feet and then packing this mixture into a mold which formed two bricks at a time. He would flip the mold over onto the ground where the bricks would dry in the sun for a few days. Then the bricks were stacked in the kiln, small building that had trenches in the floor. Wood fires were built in the trenches and the heat generated cured the bricks. It was not the sophisticated process control we are used to in modern factories. Depending on its location in the kiln, each brick saw different temperatures and heat-up rates. An individual brick might see much more heat on one

side than the other. And, consequently, even though each brick was made out of the same mold, they were all different sizes and colors; and they weren't necessarily straight.

And we soon found that building walls with bricks of different thickness and different length, that were not square, proved to be quite challenging. Even though we started out with a good level foundation, we had to continually adjust the spacing of the bricks and the thickness of the mortar to keep the walls level and straight.

Jesus is the cornerstone of His Church; He is a solid and level and true foundation. We are the bricks that form the walls of the spiritual house, and we are probably a lot more like the bricks we used in Bolivia than like the bricks that we find around here. We come in different sizes and colors and shapes, and so we often have to work a little bit more carefully to fit together to give glory and praise to God. We have to make allowances for our differences. When we don't, our wall may lean to the left or to the right. When we fit together well and follow the way established by the cornerstone, our Church is straight and true; we call that orthodox. And yes, orthodoxy is what we strive for, not leaning to the left or to the right; not liberalism nor conservatism. We built a sound and sturdy school in Bolivia with bricks that were not perfect. And God is working to build a Church that is perfect out of members who are not. St. Peter tells us that each one of us is to come to God as a living stone with all our varying dimensions and hues; that even though we may be rejected and ridiculed by our fellow men, we are precious in the eyes of God. We are all chosen by God even though He knows all our flaws.

Jesus is the cornerstone. I looked up the word *cornerstone* online at Wikipedia and this is what it said: "*The cornerstone concept is derived from the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone, thus determining the position of the entire edifice.*" Jesus is the Rock and we can climb on His back and He will carry the weight of us all. All of us need to be built up according to the way and pattern He establishes as the cornerstone.

Follow the pattern established by God, not that established by this world, and you will give glory to God. As an individual member of the Church, strive to follow the orthodox teachings of the Church, try to be straight and square and true. The more we can all do this, the more easily we will all fit together, and the stronger our Church will be.

Deacon Joe Hulway