

Holy Community

by Stewart Ruch

Stewart Ruch's sermon emphasizes the church's role as a safe house filled with the Holy Spirit, where believers are called to live as a royal priesthood and offer spiritual sacrifices in an unsafe world.

Duration: 23:55

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1

Topics: "Community"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher tells the story of a child named William who lived in an unsafe place but finds safety and a home with Mr. Tom. The preacher emphasizes the beauty of William's transformation as he decompresses and becomes a person, discovering his love for art and experiencing friendship for the first time. The preacher also discusses the metaphorical significance of the church as a living stone, chosen and precious in the sight of God. Peter's call to live differently and abstain from sinful urges is highlighted, with the reminder that the power of the resurrection gives believers hope and victory over their sinful nature.

Transcript

I just finished a beautiful novel. It's a little novel, a novella. The name of it is Goodnight, Mr. Tom.

And when I finished it, and as I've thought about this novel, it's a novel that stays with you. It has a haunting quality to it. It paints a beautiful picture of the church and of why the church is so urgently needed as we seek to live as Christians in what is an explicitly un-Christian world.

Now, it doesn't really have the church as a main character. There is a parish church, and it's a healthy church in an English town. The main character is Mr. Tom, hence Goodnight, Mr. Tom.

And he has a very small family. It's Mr. Tom and his dog. And a boy named William is introduced into the family.

It's during World War II when, in the case of many children, particularly in London, they were taken out of London during the Axis Blitzkrieg of London, and they were moved out into the countryside and they would stay with homes so they could be evacuated. And William is one of these boys who's evacuated. Now, for many children, this evacuation was a terrifying experience.

They left home. They left security. They went to a place they didn't know.

They often were used to the city. Now they're in the country, but not for William. For William, who is put with Mr. Tom, a rather kind of crotchety, seemingly grumpy old man who has a really profound, great, warm heart, William is profoundly relieved because he has come out of a deeply unsafe place where he lived with a mentally ill mother who spiritualized her regular abuse of him.

No one knows this about William when he arrives at Mr. Tom's, except a quick look at his legs and his arms tell Mr. Tom that this is a child who lived in an unsafe place. And the story is just unfolding. It's such a beautiful story of William finally safe and of Mr. Tom as a safe person who creates a home that just has the regular kind of just quotidian things of life like regular tea time and a bedroom of his own.

And William begins to actually decompress and become a person. He becomes someone who discovers he loves art. He discovers friendship for the first time in his life.

And he discovers that there is an authority figure who can be trusted. It's a beautiful picture of what the church is called to be. Because in this world where there are so many unsafe places, unsafe homes, unsafe institutions, indeed there are unsafe nations, unsafe countries, unsafe places to live, there is a place that is absolutely set into the world as the ultimate safe place, as the ultimate spiritual house as Peter calls it in our passage today.

And I'm just wondering right now if you know of anybody this morning who's in an unsafe place. Would you just imaginatively connect with them right now? Do you have a family member or somebody that you're close to or a neighbor or somebody that they're not in a good place right now? You're here. You're here.

Where the presence of God dwells but they're not. And they're not safe. I want you to be aware of the urgency of Peter's teaching here.

That the church and those who live in the church and those who go out from the church and their friendship groups and their family lives, whatever it might be, are to go out and provide spiritual housing for those who have no safety. People like William who are needing a Tom. Let's work on 1 Peter today.

Open up with me to your bulletin if you would. I joked with Father Kevin, I was like, who chose this series? And the joke is that I chose this series and he said, yeah, this sounds pretty good. And now that we're into it, I'm realizing I just have forgotten how hard 1 Peter is.

He is hard. He's very challenging to understand. So all this stuff about the uneducated fisherman that Peter was and he was kind of an imbecile, that's unhelpful.

You're actually in the presence of a metaphorical master. So many metaphors stacked on top of one another. Come here.

Just look. Verses 4 to 5. I want you to feel my homiletic pain. As you come to him, this is a picture of the church by the way, and just see how much you understand about the church after you read this beautiful metaphorical train.

One car upon another, moving down the tracks. As you come to him, a living stone. That's Jesus.

But by the way, my guess is that most of you, give me two words about Jesus, most of you would not say, ah, living stone. Right. Peter's doing something here.

A living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious. You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house. I'm already getting foggy.

To be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Got it? Right. Learning the Bible is hard work.

So let's work. We have to do some work together. What we have here is a picture of the church.

Of how a person can become a part of the people of God. Of how we live Christian in an un-Christian world. And the call is to live this place that is a safe house.

The first point is that the church is a safe house. The second thing we learn is the church is a safe house, peopled by safe people. By spiritual priests.

You have a spiritual house, a safe house, that is filled by safe people, who are the people of God. Not simply a person that has a particular office in the church, as I do as a priest, or a bishop, or Father Kevin. But as all the people of God, peopled by a safe, spirit-filled priesthood.

A spiritual priesthood. The church is a safe house. Let's look at that first.

You yourselves, verse 5, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house. Okay, key, key phrase, within the whole teaching of Peter. Why is he calling the people of God a spiritual house? First thing we need to do is get clear about the adjective.

When Peter uses the word spiritual, what is he talking about? And if you kind of default to spiritual equals ethereal, spiritual equals kind of out there, but not exactly sure what's going on, that's not what he means. So he's actually using a technical word. When he says spiritual, he means holy, spiritual.

Okay, holy, spiritual. Spiritual, when Peter talks about this as holy, spiritual, he is saying that the church is the house filled with the Holy Spirit. With the presence of the Spirit, with the power of the Spirit, the church is first and foremost a Holy Spirit structure.

She has institutional realities, but she's a Holy Spirit structure. She's enlivened by the Holy Spirit, she's filled by the Holy Spirit, she's defined by the Holy Spirit. Now, for the ancient Near Eastern people, when they would hear spiritual house, they're very likely connecting at this point not to a spiritual house as a church as we're thinking right now, but to the temple.

The people that are receiving this letter, if you may remember, they live thousands of miles away from Jerusalem where the temple stood. They're likely in what is now contemporary Turkey. But what Peter is saying profoundly is that those things that you thought were part of religion, temples, and priests, they're still part of it, but no longer do you think about it as a religious reality, but you think about it as a profound resurrection reality.

We'll get to that in just a moment. It's a resurrection reality where once you had a central spiritual temple that has now become the people of God all over the world. And you once had a caste or a class of priests and now it's all the people of God.

He's not obliterating what was true before, but he's saying there's been an absolute fulfillment of what has happened and you have to understand if you're going to be a safe house, that you as the church are a house absolutely defined by the Holy Spirit. Now, how do we understand that? And to understand that, we

have to understand that everything has been changed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything's different.

It's so important that the resurrection is not understood as a resuscitation of a man who was once dead and is now alive. It's not a resuscitation. Jesus resuscitated people, but then they died again.

In the resurrection, what you have is not a resuscitation, you have a revelation of the absolute inbreaking of the life of God into this world that it will never be the same again. What you have is a victory over the reality of death itself. That death will no longer have a sting like it used to have.

Yes, death will be the last enemy, but it will not be the last word. Amen? Death will be the last enemy, but it will not be the last word. The last word belongs to Jesus Christ who was risen from the dead and he's introduced into this world now a whole new way of living by the Holy Spirit who gives you the power of the resurrection which means that you can never live without hope.

And things can be despairing in this world and dark and hard and our hearts can create so much confusion and our sinful nature can be so powerful, but never is that enemy of our sinful nature, that enemy that is a world given over to rebellion to God, never does it have the last word because you're safe where death has no ultimate influence. And sin, and sin has no ultimate influence. The only church we try to depict the resurrection and you can't think about contemporary attempts because actually some people contemporary have tried to kind of do a picture of the resurrection like here's Jesus rising up from the grave.

If you look at it, you kind of go, ah, I don't know, because the reason you go, ah, is because the Bible never describes it. We actually hear what the Ascension is like. We read about Jesus rising from the earth, but we never hear about Jesus rising from the dead.

So when the church wanted to depict that pictorially and give us an illustration of it, what it did was it showed Jesus already risen. He has one hand pulling Adam out of a grave, another hand pulling Eve out of a grave, that that's the heart of the resurrection is that no man or woman need live by spiritual death or physical death or the fear of such again. And what's so important to understand and why this matters so much is that you'll realize the urgency of a resurrection Holy Spirit safe house when you know the reality of an unsafe house.

Some of you have known that reality and it was such a painful reality, you've just pushed it away. You don't want to remember what it was like. And you're not to live back there or revisit that, but you shouldn't utterly deny the fact that you want to do what it was to be in an unsafe place, spiritually, physically.

In the novel, after beautiful chapter upon beautiful chapter of William opening up, and I'm not spoiling it for you, it's still worth reading. His mother calls for him to return to London. And as a reader, you don't even want to read that section because you know what's coming.

And it comes. And William goes from a safe house to a profoundly unsafe house. But it creates, as the reader, an urgency to see William freed from that unsafe, abusive place.

And the story ends beautifully. To be a safe house as the church or as a Christian family or as a Christian friendship group or as a pastor, whatever it might be, to be a safe house is to become what you already are. Look at Peter's teaching.

As you come to him, translated even as you are coming to him, as you live your lives coming to him, you yourselves are being built up. This is happening and happened to you in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Become what you already are.

Remember Cinderella. In older myths, Cinderella was actually the daughter of a prince. She is put into a place of servitude and basically slavery.

She lives in a place of misery, right? But she's raised up by a fairy. She's given, actually, an opportunity to go to the ball, dressed as a beautiful princess, which is who she really is. The prince sees her at the ball.

He recognizes somebody of great beauty and nobility. He falls in love with her. But midnight strikes.

She has to disappear. She leaves her slipper. And he has to find what foot fits this slipper.

And that myth is so true to what is true about us as Christians. You are truly a royal priesthood. Your lineage is one that is good and holy and right and true in Christ.

You're given all that you need to be that safe house as the church or that safe place as a Christian family or Christian friendship group. You have everything that you need. Become what you already are.

Realize how you can meet the urgent needs of this unchristian world by welcoming people in. Some of you are doing the work of becoming a safe family. You're not that right now.

There is disease in the family and you're working on healing that. I commend that to you. And that's your work right now.

But many of you have a safe friendship group. Many of you have a safe place to invite people into. Yesterday, I did a beautiful house blessing for one of our leaders who just had been sent down from resurrection to lead a new church there in the city.

His name is Keith and Don Hartzell. The Hartzell's just got a beautiful new house through an incredible miraculous process that God developed. And we went through each room and we blessed them.

And I got so moved at one of the rooms because they've got four kids and we actually blessed the boys' rooms. There's three boys in one room. We blessed the girls' room.

There's one girl. There's a third bedroom right in that cluster. It's a beautiful bedroom.

It's got two beds in there. It's all set up. And nobody sleeps there yet because for Keith and Don, that's the room where they want the foster children to come.

They don't have foster children coming yet, but they believe so deeply that they've been given a safe place as a Christian family. They're just waiting. For when God will say, I'm pulling them out of an unsafe place.

I'm gonna put them here. Not everyone of us is called to foster or adopt. More of us are called to do so than probably do.

But all of us spiritually have that room. It's open. It's waiting for whomever God would pull out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Maybe literally in your home, but I mean it emotionally and spiritually especially. Do you have that space in your mind? Are you aware of how unsafe it is out there? And how does Williams and God providentially wants to connect them with Tom's? What makes this safe house? How does a house become safe? Yes, by the power of the resurrection, but more practically speaking, how does a house become safe? Well, a house is only as safe as the people that live in it. A church is only as full of the Lord as the people that are part of it.

Very pragmatically speaking, it comes down to the embodied reality that people make up a community. And Peter goes right to that after he cast the vision for a spiritual house. This is why a seemingly non-sequitur follows spiritual house.

Second part of verse five, to be a holy priesthood, for it's the Christian man, the Christian woman, all called to be a holy priesthood that make the spiritual house, that make the safe house, and their work is to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Okay, so what does it mean to be a priesthood? Again, to become, through Jesus' resurrection, what you already are. How do you begin to identify yourself as a priest in his spiritual house? Well, you do the work of offering spiritual sacrifices.

Again, we gotta push. We gotta scratch our heads. Okay, what does that mean? What does that mean? Well, we're still working with temple imagery.

It was the work of priests to offer literal sacrifices. They would sacrifice animals, doves, grain offerings. It was all part of how they would draw humanity close to God.

It was all part of a sacrificial system. Peter wants to say, again, sacrificial system is not obliterated. It's transformed and it's fulfilled, and now it's a spiritual.

Now, you guys already know this, right? Spiritual, you think, Holy Spirit. It's a Holy Spirit sacrifice. So your work as a priest in the kingdom of God and in the house of God is to offer a spiritual, Holy Spirit-filled sacrifice to live and keep in step with the Holy Spirit, to be saturated in your life by the Holy Spirit, to live a Holy Spirit-structured life.

What does that mean? Well, it means lots of different things. There's lots of ways we offer spiritual sacrifices. I think one thing Peter's going after here has to do with what he says in verse one, which you have in your bulletin, and then in verse 11, which you don't have.

Father Kevin preached beautifully on this last week. Put away all malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. Again and again, Peter will call us through this book to say you can live a life different than other people.

You are not. You are not a slave to your appetites. You are not a slave to your sinful nature.

You can live differently. He says it again in verse 11, right after his call to become a people of God. Beloved, I urge you, as sojourners in exile two weeks ago, to abstain from the passions, the urges, as well as the compulsions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Okay. I think what Peter's going after in this case of offering spiritual sacrifices is this. It's what happens when the reality of our sinful nature has influence in our lives, which is true for every single one of us, and will be until we die and see Christ face to face.

The sinful nature has influence. The sinful nature is a nature. In other words, it wants certain things.

It has certain proclivities. It has certain orientations. It has certain drives.

And we have a sinful nature. We have these orientations and drives and compulsions. We actually want to do what the sinful nature wants us to do, so we feel relief.

And the fact of the matter is, often when you sin, you feel relieved. At first, you feel really relieved. You're finally conforming to your sinful nature.

And that feels good. Not to mention, whatever pleasure effects might be a part of conforming to your sinful nature as well. It's a double whammy.

Ah, I finally did what my body wanted me to do or my mind wanted me to do. That's a relief. And often that felt pretty good.

That is an extremely powerful, powerful habit to form. And some of you are absolutely enslaved to your hardened heart habits, to your sinful nature habits. Because you want the relief of finally doing what your sinful nature wants you to do.

And it actually feels good. And then you hate it. But the other two are so strong.

And you do it. Or you even fight it. But the whole time you're thinking to yourself, I'm just a reprobate sinner.

I mean, the fact that I even feel this anxiety and anguish and trying not to sin, I deserve to feel anguish. Because it's all part of this sinful mix and everything else. And I think what Peter's wanting to say to you is, okay, when you want to sin, when you're tempted to sin, understand yourself as a priest.

You're a sinner, but understand your first and foremost as a priest. Become what you are. And as a priest, when you're in that place where you are ready to sin and you are ready to step into that sin, you're ready to actually fulfill that lustful thought.

You're ready to actually make that purchase that you shouldn't make. You're ready to say that angry word that you shouldn't say. You're right up there.

You're right about to do it. If you abstain, don't just see it as a kind of, you know, powerful mind over matter. See it as an offering to God.

Turn your anguish when you're tempted to sin into an offering. That's what priests do. They offer up spiritual sacrifices.

They say, rather than fulfill the urging of my sinful nature right now, the compulsion of my sinful nature, instead I will abstain and I will feel the anguish of not doing so and how I want to. But when I'm doing it, I'm a priest. Lord, I offer this moment to you.

I give it to you. I offer this moment when I want to move into all kinds of thoughts about that person that I just can't stand and I want to move there and I want to think about them in negative ways for a good 20 minutes. I'm not going to.

By the power of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection, I don't have to. And I offer it. I'm a priest.

And I offer spiritual sacrifices to you, Jesus. You've got to learn this. You've got to learn how to do this.

It's core to your identity as a Christian priest. You're a sacrificial being. This is what you're made to do.

I have to keep learning this. I have to keep stepping into this. I'm not free from this.

But when I first turned from several years of many habits of a hardened heart and sinful nature decisions, I need a special help here. And when I learned how to do this, I would be at my workplace. I wasn't working in a Christian workplace.

I was working in a public school in Oak Park, which I can assure you is not a Christian workplace. And I wouldn't wear a cross because I couldn't, so I kept it in my pocket, kept the cross in my pocket. And when I would have an urging for whatever sin that I was used to committing, I would thrust my hand in my pocket.

I would grab that cross. I would make myself look up. And I would just say, I'm not gonna go there.

And I offer this to you. And there was an ennobling that came in that moment. And I was positioning myself biblically as a priest.

Yes, I'm a sinner who needs saving. But I'm given hope by the resurrection to overcome death and sin. That's how a person becomes part of a people.

That's how a safe house is created because we're all such sinners that we create safety for others when we live in the reality that we need the power of the resurrection to save us. You're a holy people. A royal priesthood.

A chosen nation. Let's open our houses. Let's open this house in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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