

1 Peter 2:2-10

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.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,

 a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected

 has become the very head of the corner,”

and

“A stone that makes them stumble,

 and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But 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 him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,

 but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy,

 but now you have received mercy.

Last week, the former governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie said, "The message is that the American people have gone through significant death before." He pointed to the first and second World Wars as examples of how "we've gone through it and we've survived it. We sacrificed those lives."

Well, more blunt talk from Christie. I'm sure we haven't forgotten his words to the Jersey Shore people when Superstorm Sandy was about to hit. He said, "Get the Hell off the beach!" And we applauded him for that.

But this, this is something different. Yes, we all know that during this Covid-19 crisis over one million people have gotten sick and over 75,000 have died so far. Projections say that far from getting better, the death rate may very well increase to 3000 people per day. Per day! And here is our former governor saying, "We sacrificed those lives." I wonder if the governor, having some of the higher risk factors as he does, would be willing to be one of those who got "sacrificed" in the name of reopening the economy? We never think it will happen to us, until, of course, it does.

Now let us be clear, this pandemic is not going away. Christie is right in that we have gone through "significant death before." One hundred years ago, 50 million people around the world died in what they called the "Spanish Flu" — an unimaginable number. Yes, every war has military and far, far, more civilian casualties. We never talk about those, for some reason. The 11 million who died in concentration camps, the millions who died of starvation in Russia and many other places.

And of course, we quickly forget about genocides destroying life in Cambodia, China, Russia, Rwanda, Sudan, and even here when we look at how Native Americans and African Americans were abused — and still are.

Yet, there is something very different about the almost casual, dismissive way Christie puts what is going to be happening in this country. Covid? So what? Just something else out there killing people. We Americans have gone through significant death before. Why should we care about this one?

The problem with Christie's statement is that he and the millions who think like him, is that human life is being reduced to a mere number. We can either have a prosperous economy with a lot of dead sacrifices, or we can have a collapsed economy with more people living. That's it, folks, money or lives, money or lives, money or lives — take your pick.

Of course people want and need to get back to work. Of course we don't want anyone to even get sick from Covid-19, much less die from it. And we know that getting people back to work will take

awhile and we know that the suffering here and around the world will continue for a long, long time. This is reality.

However, human life is not part of an equation. Death and suffering are not merely abstract propositions to be factored into how fast we can open the economy. People are not robots to be used and discarded at will. The executive order last week forcing meat packers back into their infected processing plants with minimal or no protection is certainly a death sentence for some, just like an order for a platoon to go into battle is a certainly a death sentence for some soldiers.

Now what does all of this have to do with Mother's Day? Shouldn't I be talking about happy families with happy children doing all kinds of happy things? No question. I can't speak for everyone, but it's probably true for most people that the biggest influence on our lives has been our mothers. It's always amusing at football games on TV that when the camera is pointed toward the team bench, all these huge, strong athletes are waving and mouthing, "Hi Mom!" We dads have our role to play, and in some cases are both mother and father to our children. However, by and large, it is mom who holds families together, makes expectations clear, and tries to help us understand about life, love, and human dignity.

That is why in our scripture said to have been written by Peter, he asks followers of Christ to drink in the pure, spiritual milk that will empower them to grow into the knowledge of God and better understand what it means to be saved. Mothers (and a few fathers) feed their children milk so they may grow strong and healthy. Christ offers us spiritual milk so that we may grow strong in Jesus.

And the church Peter was writing to needed to be strong. Let us not forget who most of the early Christians were. They were the people at the bottom of the ladder. Early Christians, for the most part, were slaves, women, widows and orphans, laborers, and many others mistreated by society — the same kind of folks who are unemployed right now. What they saw in the gospel message was a way of thinking about life and being human that was not about money or power, but about human dignity and love.

While I will not say that money and power are the direct opposite of human dignity and love, they often find themselves opposed to each other. For the people of the first century, no different from the people of the twenty-first century, obtaining money and power is often achieved at the expense of human dignity and love. We can all name people, people who are well-known and even people to whom we may be related, people who got where they are by exploiting others, abusing others, ignoring others, belittling others and exalting themselves in every way possible to obtain what they wanted.

But it is the followers of Christ, people of genuine faith, people who suspect and even reject this world and its priorities — these people have tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

There are many pathways in life. None of us goes down exactly the same road. We are very much the product of our choices. However, when we choose, as we all must, we often find ourselves as having either to follow a path which results in more money and more power or one that builds dignity and increases love.

Peter compared Christ to a living stone, because stones were and still are essential to building up. But all stones that go into building are not alike. Choices must be made. And the house, the inner house, the spiritual house that we are building throughout our lives is composed of the stones out of which we choose to build it.

We can understand, therefore, why the spiritual stone called Jesus Christ was rejected by mortals yet was regarded as chosen and precious in God's sight. Peter urges us to ourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. What does that mean? We are to look beyond the self-destructive, humanity-hating, creation-wrecking world embraced by the rich and powerful and turn toward the uplifting, community-driven, mutual-loving world intended by God and proclaimed and lived out by Jesus Christ.

In this letter, Peter is urging his hearers to do something scary: oppose the accepted way of doing things in their society. The early Christians were people who were the losers. They were at the bottom. They were used and abused and considered completely disposable, just like the workers many politicians wish to sacrifice right now. Yet, they simply went along with the system that abused them even though there were many, many more of them than there were rich and powerful people who controlled them. The difference, of course, is that money and power buy one the ability to control lives by paying or not paying people. Money and power buy the ability to command armies to force people to obey what they want you to do. Having money and power, as Jesus very well knew when he began his ministry, gives those who have the authority to kill and eliminate trouble-makers who threaten the established way of doing things. That's why Jesus died.

Here's the problem, friends. Some 300 years after the church began, the Roman Empire took it over. They made Christianity the official religion of the Empire and forced everyone to join. You might think, hooray! But what it really meant was that the government and the religion were one and the same. The Empire controlled the church and tried its best to make sure anyone in the church who opposed the empire was silenced. Instead of being able to oppose the forces of money and power represented

by the Empire, the church became part of the money and power and acted pretty much as the government wanted.

This has been the way things have been for over 1600 years! The church and the government have been in this strange dance of money and power. In Europe, eventually every nation had its official church, to which everyone technically belongs. There is, for example, nothing called the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. Rather, it is called the Church of Scotland and Queen Elizabeth is the head of that church!

This is why we study and remember history. Because the situation in which we find ourselves today is rooted in how things were. We are very much the products of the actions and decisions of our ancestors.

We know the story of our own country. The United States was founded in part by people who wanted to get away from state-owned churches. They wanted to be free to worship without kings and other officials telling them how to behave. The Bible, not the government, would be their standard.

All well and good. But along the way, something very human happened, the church once again, like a moth drawn to a flame, became a puppet of government. For decades and decades, churches like this one blindly and unashamedly accepted and supported the policies of the government of the day and ignored the words of Peter and much of what Jesus taught. Jesus was reduced to just being some nice guy who was killed almost at random. The church's fundamental message of love and human dignity was ignored.

Is it any wonder that there are so many people who accept the idea of God, but reject the church? There are so many examples of hypocrisy in the church right now. The spiritual milk Peter urges us to drink is being flushed down the drain, just like so many dairy farms are flushing their milk down the drain while millions go hungry.

Brothers and Sisters, we need to reclaim what God has called us to be. We as a church need to look at ourselves in the mirror, especially on this Mother's Day, and ask whether we represent, whether we stand for the lessons of life and love and dignity that many of our mothers tried to instill in us? Or are we just going along with the system because it's easier?

What Governor Christie said last week spells it all out: America is about money and power. Love and human dignity have no place. In his opinion, if tens of thousands get Covid-19 and even die, that's OK, because we Americans are used to sacrificing lives.

There is no question that we have to reopen the economy. There is no question people have to get back to work, not just to earn a living, but also because human beings weren't meant to be cooped up at home.

But, in all things we do, our first, last, and only priority as followers of Jesus Christ is to insure that as few lives are lost as possible. That we use the power of government to design and enforce creative ways of working and interacting with each other safely. That we finally acknowledge that the most valuable members of society are not the ones with fancy houses and big bank accounts but the ones who are enabling our society to function day by day. We must commit ourselves to unashamedly supporting humanity, not money, not power. We must be for the ones who share love and build each other up, as opposed to those who do their best just to mindlessly enrich themselves.

As the church, in every way we can, in our communities and in our homes, we must push for the solutions to reopen our country in ways that, frankly, would be acceptable to our mothers: treating each other fairly, recognizing the contributions of all, and fighting the bullies who by fear would drive us apart. In other words, let us be the Holy Priesthood that proclaims what Jesus stood for and stand for that which builds love and dignity, no matter what!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.