

An Architecture of Resurrection

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

May 10, 2020

I Peter 2:2-10 and John 14:1-14

O God, who from our mothers' arms has led us on our way, we thank you for mothers and grandmothers, stepmothers and mothers-in law, for surrogate mothers and mother figures of all kinds. We remember mothers now gone and give you thanks for blessed memory. We stand with those who have sought, and are seeking, motherhood. Surround them with your tender care. We stand with those for whom this day does not bring good thoughts. Surround them with your compassion. And surround us all with your grace during this health crisis, abiding with those who respond and those who need your special presence. Amen.

My mother, Claudia Starr McLaughlin Wilkinson, died seven years ago this week, much too early and quite unexpectedly. Grief and gratitude abide. She was born in a small coal mining town in West Virginia and was grew up in Akron, Ohio. She became an outstanding teacher, and, later, after receiving her PhD in midlife, a distinguished school administrator. In an era when pastor's wives were expected to take on certain roles, she generally declined. Her faith was strong, as a church elder, a member of presbytery committees and a "whipper-upper" of volunteers for mission projects. She was an extraordinarily devoted spouse and parent. She would have been all over this pandemic, single-handedly flattening the curve, enforcing mask and social-distance compliance, making sure all her students had what they needed, food, supplies, etc.

I learned many things from my mother, for which I remain grateful. Hard work. Frugality. Deep commitment to education. Resilience. Devotion. Service. Faith.

I learned many things from my father, as well. Home maintenance was not one of them. If it could not be fixed with duct tape or a staple gun, we were in big trouble.

One pandemic guilty pleasure is a show called "Home Town." An adorable couple named Ben and Erin – she a designer, he a carpenter, rehab houses in their home town of Laurel, Mississippi, leaving people with beautiful homes and restoring an entire small-town house-by-house. I think that if I watch enough, I will somehow learn home repair by osmosis.

Part of each episode of “Home Town” is devoted to the cosmetics – subway tile versus marble in a backsplash, ecru or taupe or putty for the curtains (newsflash: they are all the same color!), what material for the fabulous new countertops.

What I appreciate is the foundational work. Ripping out drywall to see what’s underneath. Checking ceiling joists. Making sure sub-flooring is in good condition before a new floor is laid down.

I haven’t really learned how to *do* anything by watching “Home Town,” any more than I have learned how to do a 360-degree dunk by watching Michael Jordan and “The Last Dance.” But in fact, “Home Town” has reminded me what my mom taught me, that the hard work of getting the fundamental basics right matters, before proceeding any further, that a beautiful house is only just that without a good structure.

I have learned that foundations matter. For old houses. For nations. For churches. For our own hearts and souls.

I Peter, nestled in the back of the New Testament, reminds us of that, reminds us that whatever spiritual house we seek to build, that the foundation has already been laid. Not by us. By God. We are called to come to Jesus, “a living stone,” the cornerstone. We are told that we can become living stones, to be built into a spiritual house. Think of that – you, me, all of us, living stones – being built into a spiritual house.

I have been thinking about that house a lot these days. Every day my inbox is flooded with articles: “The Church Will Never Be the Same” or “What the Church Is Learning During the Pandemic” or “How the Pandemic Is an Opportunity for the Church to Reset for the Future” and so forth and so on. Some of the articles are helpful; some are not. But the question is the right one, prompted by I Peter. If we are living stones, to be built into a spiritual house, what kind of stones are we and what will that house look like, now?

Jesus punctuates that question profoundly, in John’s gospel. He imagines for his followers God’s house, a house with many dwelling places, many rooms.

Because of COVID-19, I have been re-envisioning that house, with all of us as stones, its foundation, its rooms, what it has looked like and what it will need to look like.

William Loader writes that “The stone imagery invites us to see ourselves together not as a random pile of rocks or stones strewn across the landscape of interim territory, but as stones belonging to a structure built on Christ.”

Loader continues: “The image expands to include not only belonging in a building, but also belonging in creating a space for celebrating the presence of God. People together are sacred

places and spaces, temples not made with hands. It defines the church not as the building in which we meet but as the building we have become. Our role is to be a space where people engage holiness and sense the presence of God.”

So, while the physical building matters, *this* physical building matters, it goes deeper than that. Regardless of the *where* – this place, other places, virtual places – and even the *how*, it’s the *what*, and the *why* – the foundation, the basic building blocks, the spiritual stones that will truly matter.

The cornerstone has been the same – Jesus, the risen Christ – all along, yet I do agree with thinking that insists that this crisis is an opportunity to inspect our foundation to make sure it’s solid and then to do some renovation, more than slapping a coat of paint on it or getting new appliances, but serious design work, looking forward boldly rather than backward wistfully.

Our tradition thinks in threes. I think in threes. Allow me to suggest three kinds of stones that are needed to build this house, a kind of architecture of resurrection.

WORSHIP. That is obvious. It’s what we do the most; it’s what we do the best; it’s the most important thing we do. “O come, let us worship,” the psalms tell us repeatedly, and we do. Worship in the age of the coronavirus will take on a new urgency. Each word of scripture, the words new to us and the words familiar to us, will take on focused importance. Prayers will resound with poignancy and power. Notes sung and played will do so with beauty and clarity. We will be inspired, not just made to feel good, but inspired. And that inspiration will send us out, the second stone.

It must send us out to **SERVE**, to love our neighbor in deep and transformative ways. You’ve no doubt seen commercials that insist that we are in this together, language meant to make us feel good about that particular product but also a reminder about how important it has been for us to stay home, to socially distance, to abide by these unwelcome and unexpected practices. And we *may* be in this together; I hope so, all tossed into the same waters. But it’s been clear that we are not all in the same boat on these waters. We – the church – must work to make that so, exploring and addressing matters of privilege, race, poverty, iniquities about food insecurity or access to technology. For we in the Chestnut Hill church community, I believe at least that we are being called to double down our connections with our mission partners, and to forge new initiatives that use our gifts boldly and with compassion.

Worship feeds mission and mission feeds worship, a cycle, the ongoing interaction between spirituality and social responsibility.

And here is one stone more. It doesn’t fit as neatly in a one-word descriptor, so I will use two: “**CONNECTED COMMUNITY.**” Had I had a third word I would have said “*compassionate*

connected community.” There will be libraries of books written on this coronavirus experience, and many will explore grief and trauma. Comparisons to the World War II experience need to be made carefully, but history teaches us that that war affected a whole nation, whether you fought in it or not, regardless of your age or station or location, in that moment and for generations to follow. COVID-19 will have that kind of impact – more directly for those who were infected, or those who lost loved ones, or those who responded on the front lines. But all of us. How will we live more fully into a vision of compassionate and connected community? How will we care for one another, families with children, our millennials, our older members, vulnerable in some ways and so strong in others, and all of us in-between. How will we learn together and reflect and grow in light of this experience? When we can finally come together, *how* will we come together – not just the mechanics (can we shake hands or not?) but the deeper meaning behind the mechanics.

John Petty writes that the word translated as “rooms” or “dwelling places” in Jesus’ discourse in John “actually means a temporary resting place for a traveler.” That’s what we are, fellow travelers. How can the church, how can *this* church, provide that kind of radical hospitality, and imagine new friends joining us?

I fear, a bit, that this sermon has turned into something of a strategic planning seminar. But the texts drive us to think about the church and the twin seasons we are in – Easter and COVID – and raise real questions about who we are and who God is calling us to be. And if we are stones, called and empowered to build a spiritual house, with many rooms, then it’s important to imagine what that might look like, worship, and mission and a safe haven for fellow travelers.

In his poem from the England of the 1930s called “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” T.S. Eliot writes “And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored.”

Our faith teaches us that Christ is the sure foundation, the cornerstone of this house. Can that affirmation not be a pious cliché, but a true blueprint? Because of the promises of resurrection, of Easter, we can approach the future with hope. The rest is up to us – how we will live out our calling as living stones, built into a spiritual house. What do we leave behind in the renovation, and what restored church will emerge? It is an exciting question, a daunting one, even a life-giving one. Because if you believe in the church, as I do, you know that our response will matter, to each of us, and to a world hungry for healing and hope, justice and love. Amen.