

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“Gilded Rocks”**  
**I Peter 1: 22-2:5**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**May 14, 2017**

It is fitting that on this day when our confirmands here at DCPC make their public professions of faith, one of them receiving the sacrament of baptism and the others claiming for themselves the promises that their parents and the church made to them when they were baptized, our Scripture lesson contains images related to baptism.

In order to recognize the baptismal images, however, it helps to know a little bit about how baptisms took place in the church of the second century when I Peter was probably written. If you have attended the Great Vigil of Easter service held on the Saturday night before Easter here at DCPC, this will sound familiar for that service is a liturgical reenactment of the baptismal practices in the early church.

Baptisms were customarily held on the night before Easter, in a service that continued into an Easter sunrise service. Those who were to be baptized—they were called catechumens—had been studying for two years or more in preparing to take on the identity of Christian. It was common practice for the whole family to be baptized at the same time.

Baptisms were performed in a room separate from the rest of the congregation which was already gathered for worship. The baptistry was large and deep enough for adults to kneel in and have water poured over them. Women and men were baptized separately because candidates for baptism were completely undressed. After being immersed in the water, the newly baptized were then clothed in new white robes before joining the rest of the congregation in worship. Those who had just been baptized were the first to receive communion. Before the cup of wine, they drank from a chalice of milk and honey to show that they were now in the Promised Land. (1)

As the Scripture is read, pay attention to words which refer to this baptismal ceremony. Listen for “rid yourselves” which refers to the removing of clothing and to references to being “purified” and to “milk.”

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What is the cleanest that you have ever felt?

Maybe it was after you had finished playing a rough and tumble game of touch football in the rain or survived the half marathon for which you had been training for three months or spent a hot afternoon pulling up pesky weeds from your flower bed or returned from a muddy weekend camping trip with your Boy Scout troop. You stepped into the shower and turned the knob. And streams of water, blessed *clean* water, spouted forth and cascaded down over your body and all the sweat, all the grit, all the grime, disappeared down the drain, and you felt as pure and clean as a baby enveloped in

that sweet post-bath smell that makes us want to press our noses inside the cushiony folds of that sweet baby neck and sniff their sweet aromas and kiss the daylights out of them.

This is the picture of baptism that I Peter gives us in these verses.

Perhaps you remember that famous baptism scene in the movie “O Brother, Where Art Thou?”

The character Delmar emerges from the river, and he shouts to his partners in crime Everett and Pete who are on the shore, “I’ve been saved. The preacher told me that all my sins have been forgiven! Including that time that I knocked off the Piggly Wiggly!” Everett responds, “But Delmar, I thought you said that you were innocent of that charge.” Delmar said, “Well, I was lying....and now I’ve been forgiven of that too!”

I Peter wants us to feel like Delmar felt. I Peter wants us to feel the power of our baptisms. To feel whatever malice, whatever insincerity, whatever envy, whatever sin that is within us, whether our sin consists of knocking off the Piggly Wiggly or speaking unkindly to the person sitting across from you at the breakfast table, gliding off our souls and eddying down the drain so that it is no longer a part of us.

This is the power of baptism that I Peter wants us to feel. “You have been born anew...through the living and enduring word of God.”

I Peter, however, being I Peter, doesn’t allow us to linger in the baptismal bathwater for too long. Perhaps he knew that when linger in the singular experience of baptism for too long, our faith will get all wrinkly and unsightly like our skin does if we soak in the bath tub for too long.

So, I Peter makes a sharp turn in his use of images at the beginning of chapter 2. He exhorts these newly baptized Christians to become like *rocks*.

To describe Christians as newly born babies who are washed clean and fed “pure spiritual milk” tends to put the emphasis on Christians as individuals.

This is important, but it is not the whole story. (2)

Hence, I Peter makes use of the metaphor of rocks, of stones, of living stones built into a spiritual house.

In “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” the newly baptized Delmar is beckoned to the shore by his partner in crime Everett, “Come on, Delmar, we’ve got bigger fish to fry!”

I was thinking about this whole matter of being beckoned up of out of the baptismal water to fry bigger fish and the metaphor of Christians as living rocks and being built into a spiritual house and how our egos are always beckoning to come out and fry bigger fish. I was thinking of all this and trying to fit it all together when I came across a section in Anne Lamott’s new book *Hallelujah Anyway* in which she describes the Chinese practice of gold leaf.

“The ancient Chinese had a practice of embellishing the cracked parts of valued possessions with gold leaf, which says: We dishonor it if we pretend that it hadn’t gotten broken. It says: We value

this enough to repair it. So it is not denial or a cover-up. It is the opposite, an adornment of the break with gold leaf which draws the cracks into greater prominence. The gold leaf becomes part of its beauty.”

I love this, don't you? I love it.

We come up out of the waters of baptism made clean by God's mercy. And with our hear still damp, our egos lead us off to fry bigger fish. And once we move in the direction of frying bigger fish, we are bound to splash some hot grease on somebody or get some hot grease splashed on us. If we live long enough, we are bound to hurt somebody, consciously or unconsciously, and to be hurt ourselves.

But the good news which I Peter has for us is that the same grace that washes us clean in our baptism has the power to take our brokenness, our pain, our disappointment, and our sing, and to use even this to build a spiritual house.

What I especially love is that God does not say to us: all you gilded rocks: get up and get to work and build your spiritual house all by yourselves. I Peter says: let yourselves *be built* into a spiritual house. We are to be open to God's grace which takes each one of us in our gold-leafed, beautiful brokenness and make of us a holy, healing priesthood.

A month or so ago, Anne Lamott engaged in a public conversation at Dominican University. She told of when her son Sam was 16 and being outrageous, she hauled off and slapped him. She said that he was being so outrageous that even Jesus would have slapped him, but she never had. And she thought it was the end of the world. She felt awful. She prayed and she cried and she got out a lot of grief and rage, and finally, she was worn out and went and lay down on the couch and went to sleep. An hour later, she woke up. And there was Sam, asleep himself on the other couch.

Annie said that grace really does meet you right where you are and it doesn't leave you there. Something supernatural happened between a furious, scared mom and a furious, thwarted teenage boy that tenderized them.

Well, Annie wrote a story and included this incident. She received 300 "bad" letters, telling her what a terrible parent she was ("no better than a pedophile priest," her personal favorite).

Later, Sam was off in college in Spokane. Annie was to speak in Spokane, and so Sam asked if he could invite 20 or so of his friends to attend. They came and sat on the front row.

Annie and Sam were back stage. She asked him, "what should I read tonight."

Sam replied, "Read the story 'Heat.' Read it because it is the what the parents need to hear." (4)

This is the good news from I Peter. We get to be real. We get to make mistakes. We can have horrible rifts in our lives. And by God's grace, we can be healed.

"Come to him, come to Christ, a living stone, and like living, gold-leafed stones, with countless imperfections and shortcomings, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood."

1. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez and Justo L. Gonzalez, *A Faith More Precious Than Gold: A Study of I Peter* (Louisville: Presbyterian Women Horizons Study, 1989), 25-26.
2. *Ibid.*, 29.
3. Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway* (New York: Riverhead, 2017), 49.
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fpOShNfeHI>