

## Get Off the Bus

1 Peter 2: 2-10

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Greensboro, NC

October 14, 2018

When I was in seminary, I had a professor of homiletics, or preaching, who believed in the importance of a good sermon title. So, he would tell the story (now dated) of a man who would ride around Manhattan on a Sunday morning looking for a place to worship. The way he decided was by passing the church and reading the marquee out front that posted the sermon title. When he saw a sermon title that grabbed him, he would get off the bus and attend worship. Dr. Macleod would tell his class of aspiring preachers, “Have a sermon title that will get people off the bus.”

Well, our staff has heard me tell that story for years. At our Monday worship planning meetings, I would whine that I’d have to have a title ready for the bulletin and Thursday’s email before I had actually written a sermon and it had to be a title got people off the bus! So, at Monday’s meeting, I said I had no idea what my sermon title would be because I had no idea what I would say in a last sermon. So, our very clever Anne Albert suggested, “Get Off the Bus.”

Thank you for getting off the bus today and for these past eighteen years. Folks have asked me what I might say in a last sermon with some suggesting this would be the day “to really say what you think” as if I might drop a sermon bomb! But truth is I have said what I *really* wanted to say for eighteen years. Others have wondered if on this day I would give you a final charge. But, again I’ve had eighteen years.

You may have heard me say that one of our family Christmas traditions when our girls, Meredith and Emily, were in kids and adolescents, was to watch *The Muppets Christmas Carol* on Christmas Eve, where Michael Caine plays Scrooge and the Muppet characters play the roles in Charles Dickens’ classic story. One scene has Fozziewig as Scrooge’s first employer, it’s a Christmas banquet and Fozziewig addresses the guests which include the Marley brothers:

“Here is my Christmas speech.” He clears his throat and says, “Thank you all and Merry Christmas.”

There is a brief silence, then the Marley brothers start this exchange:

“That was the speech?”

“It was dumb.”

“It was obvious.”

“It was pointless.”

“It was short!”

“I loved it!”

Which is to say, it seems to me that short is the order of the day.

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I chose today’s scripture from *1 Peter* for two reasons: It is a text about the church which is what today is about. And it was the scripture I used for my very first sermon in my very first church thirty-nine years ago. I knew then that this thing called the church was important, theologically important, and truth was I really wanted to understand the church and its purpose better. And I wanted to love the church in spite of our institutional flaws.

Did you hear that scripture from *1 Peter*?

Peter, that irrepressible, spontaneous and very human disciple of Jesus, is the probable author. He didn’t write it but dictated it to Silvanus, who was also known as Silas. Silas, you remember, was a significant figure and leader in the early church.

Peter is now an older man, much older than the figure we know through the Gospels. His letter is to Christians in Asia Minor, which is today’s Turkey. Most scholars figure that Peter was somewhere between the ages of fifty-five and sixty when he wrote this. Which is to say a lot of water has gone under the bridge in these forty years. And Peter who so failed his Christ in the early morning hours of Good Friday, has become one of the great leaders of the Jesus movement, the Church.

The Christian community he was writing to was under persecution. It was after the erratic and crazed Roman Empire Nero had burned half of Rome and then blamed it on the Christians, which lead to a savage outbreak of persecution against Christians.

What does Peter, the elder statesman of the church, say to these vulnerable Christians?

He reminds them of who they are and who they can be by using an image of strength. He says, “Come to Jesus a living stone and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”

He calls them stones, a reminder of strength in the face of what they are facing. But the metaphor is plural... not stone but stones. They will be formed, built, by the Divine Architect, God through Christ, into a spiritual house, a community that will stand tall against pain and suffering and the stuff that life throws at us all.

Stone is a metaphor we should understand here, as we worship in this grand cathedral. Each brick in this cathedral is just a single stone, but mortared together, it is a mighty fortress.

Do you get it? Alone, we Christians have little strength but as we allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual community, then we take on the strength and character of the One we serve, the One who unites us, the One who turns us into a Royal priesthood, God's own people.

And our purpose, according to Peter is simply and profoundly this: to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

Since the day I entered ministry almost forty years ago, the cultural prophets have predicted the death or the decline or the irrelevance of the church. And though we have seen a cultural wave sweep through this church and all American churches, we Presbyterians embrace our historic mantra that "we are reformed and always reforming."

What I have always loved about this place, is that though we have a rich and deep tradition, you have always been more attuned to the future than to the past... which is the spirit of "always reforming."

The church is so different from civic or community groups because there is something mystical about being the body of Christ. We are at our best when we reflect the character of Christ and Christ turns the ordinary into extraordinary.

I sometimes think of it this way. Imagine a pair, an ordinary pair of glasses, or a writing pen, or a chair. But suppose that pair of glasses had been worn by Rosa Parks, or the pen was used by Ernest Hemmingway, or the chair was from the desk of Dean Smith! Those ordinary objects are made extraordinary because of the person who possessed them.

That's us, the church. Ordinary made extraordinary because of the One who possesses us. I thank God for that kind of spirit here.

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And more than anything else, I merely want to say *thank you*. And this is where I am afraid I will become, not the Grim Reaper, but the Grim Weeper. So, if I can say this, listen up:

I am so proud, sinfully proud, to have been your pastor for this part of First Presbyterian's history. The fact that I am only the eleventh senior pastor in almost two hundred years says more about you than any of the eleven of us who have had this privilege.

It's been a journey of grace and gratitude. Cathy has heard enough bad sermons in thirty-nine years to model to me what it means to be grace dispensing. And our children had the blessing of experiencing the love of Christ through people in our churches who loved them, accepted them and modeled for them the character of Christ... so that when Christ showed up, they were able to recognize him.

When I was being interviewed or rather interrogated by the PNC nineteen years ago, it was a long process... with three visits they made to Mobile and two or three visits Cathy and I made to Greensboro. In the last interview, one moment stands out. We were near the end it seemed, and one member asked me: "Can you *do* this job?" I said, "I can with the right team."

Since "bus" is an important word today, I believe what business guru Jim Collins later said: "You get the wrong people off the bus, and the right people on the bus and in the right seats." Part of what has made my experience so meaningful is that I have had the right team.

Bless you and thank you