

# A Spiritual and Worldly House

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

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

*Today we think in special ways about our worship, music and arts ministry. For decades and decades this ministry has been a pillar of life at Third Church and that continues to this moment. We express our gratitude for singers and ringers, for ushers and greeters, for organizers and preparers, for readers and acolytes – literally for the hundreds of people who by sharing their gifts undergird this ministry. We are the thankful recipients of those gifts as we seek together to worship God with heart and soul and voice. Thanks especially to Caroline Robinson, Mary Ann Rutkowski and Peter DuBois for your leadership. We are grateful indeed.*

*Today, as is our Mothers' Day tradition, we will receive the Presbyterian Home offering to support the work of this vital institution. Over many decades Third Church members have resided at RPH, and we have been well represented on the RPH board. Thank you in advance for your support today of this offering, for the work of RPH and for our important and ongoing relationship.*

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Let us pray. O God, who from our mothers' arms has led us on our way, we thank you for the gift of this day. 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 pleasant thoughts. Surround them with your compassion. And surround us all with your grace, and transform us by the hearing of your word. We pray in Christ's name and for his sake. Amen.

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

I learned many things from my father, as well. Home repair was not one of them. If it could not be fixed with duct tape or a staple gun, we were in trouble. Perhaps that's why I love the PBS

show “This Old House” so much. I wonder if I hope subconsciously that if I watch enough, I will learn home repair by osmosis. Probably not. Still I watch Norm, Tom, Rich do things with hammers and saws and wrenches that border on the artistic.

Part of each episode of “This Old House” 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!), how long will stainless appliances be a thing.

But what I love is the foundational work. Ripping out drywall to see what’s underneath. Excavating a century old boiler. Lifting a colonial era house 6 inches to make sure everything is in alignment, so that new flooring can be installed, new plumbing and electrical.

I haven’t really learned to *do* anything by watching “This Old House,” any more than I have learned to do the Paso Doble by watching “Dancing with the Stars” or how to pole vault by watching the Olympics. But in fact, “This Old House” has taught me that the hard work of getting the fundamental basics right matters, before proceeding any further, that a beautiful wall is only just that without good insulation behind it, that investing up front will pay dividends later. I am still not too handy with a power tool, but I know what a soffit or a PEC line is.

And I know that foundations matter. For old houses. For communities. For churches. For our own hearts and souls.

A letter nestled in the back of the New Testament reminds us of that lesson. A letter called I Peter 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,” precious in God’s sight. Then we are told that we in turn can become such living stones, and to be built into a spiritual house. Think of that – you, me, all of us as living stones – being built into a spiritual house.

With Jesus as the foundation, just imagine what this house can be. The power of the image is nearly limitless.

- With Jesus as the foundation, the spiritual house can provide safety and security, a kind of respite from the world. But only for a time.
- With Jesus as the foundation, think of the floors and the walls and the rooms – mission, education, on this day worship and music and arts.
- With Jesus as the foundation, think of what we can do collectively – all we living stones – that we could never do individually.

William Loader writes that “The stone imagery invites us to see ourselves also as stones and then 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. It is a wonderful image of belonging. It invites us to our own imaginings and reflections: stones are old, young, brittle, strong, shiny; fractured, solid, large, small, differently shaped and oriented - there's room for everyone."

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."

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We do not know if I Peter had access to the Gospel of John; probably not. But we do have access, and so Jesus's words punctuate Peter's. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places..."

We often read these words at funerals and memorial services, as we did yesterday, to assure us of God's eternal presence and care. And that is fine. But the image can be more expansive.

John Petty writes that the word translated as ("rooms" (NRSV)) or "habitations" is, "In the popular imagination...often taken to mean that the Methodists will have a room--indeed, a mansion--and so will the Catholics and the Baptists." Petty doesn't mention the Presbyterians. Maybe we get a closet somewhere! The word, he says, "actually means a temporary resting place for a traveler." "(Rooms)," Petty concludes, "is less about getting some fancy digs in the hereafter, in a house separate from the people you can't stand, and more about welcome, hospitality, and community for people traveling on a journey."

A spiritual house, made by us living stones, who do our very best to acknowledge Christ as the foundation. What do we do with these images, and what does it mean for us as a church?

It means that we first take real housing seriously. Even though we this day are considering the *image* of a house, it is impossible for any of God's children to think imaginatively if they have no real shelter, no real house. That's why things like Habitat for Humanity and more than a dozen Third Church trips to New Orleans for hurricane relief matter. That's why again this week so many of you are volunteering your time and energy to turn this church building into a shelter for homeless families. In order for a spiritual house to exist, a real one must as well. To provide physical housing is a part of our calling.

After we have affirmed that Christ is our cornerstone, our foundation, we look at the rest of our building material. That's why "inclusion" is so important for the church, and not just a trendy

pursuit. It is about welcoming people, inviting people, for their sake, to be sure. But it is also about welcoming and inviting for the church's sake. The church can't fully be the church without every stone, *every* stone – all abilities, all gender identities and orientations, all colors, all ages, all perspectives. All. To leave someone beyond the circle is to deprive us of precious building blocks, and we, the church, can't afford that.

I want us to keep thinking about this image – house – and what it means. This congregation is now in its 190<sup>th</sup> year. We are in our third location, and this location started with one building and now exists as three, with two of the three buildings – the parish house and the sanctuary – having undergone significant renovation and restoration.

So our building matters, our house matters. But it can never be its own end. We gather in order to disperse. We worship God because that's the most important thing we do, yet our worship is hollow if it does not lead to service in the community. We teach our children, we nurture our adults, within the walls of this place, but that formation is intended to cultivate witness in the world.

There are monastic traditions in the wider Christian community. People withdraw and do not emerge to engage. I respect those. Yet we who live in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition are called to live out our faith in the world. This magnificent place – which rightly helps set an inspiring tone for faithful worship of almighty God – remains just that, a launching pad, a way station, that gathers us in to offer rest and respite, and then sends us out.

That we are the best stones we can be to build this building, yes. That we make sure that all are welcome to live out their calling as stones, yes. But our walls must be permeable, no real barriers between “in here” and “out there,” a building with windows and doors open to the world, to offer inspiration within in order to cultivate transformation beyond.

So look around for a minute. Look at this beautiful space, wood and glass and stone, angles and curves, colors and texture, shadows and light. This is you. This is us. What meaning does it have? Then look around again. Look at your beautiful partners, your strong and mighty co-building blocks, your fellow living stones. Consider your room, and theirs. And consider your foundation. Our foundation. What things all of us, and each of us, must do to shore things up, to make sure the foundation is sound and aligned and balanced and sure. So that “this old house” can become this renewed house, this faithful house – for each of us and for all of God's children. Amen.

