

A Spiritual House

I'm told that over time people start to look like their pets; husbands and wives start to look alike after many years of marriage. I don't know. Jo Lynn doesn't look anything like me (thank goodness!), and we'll have been married 56 years on the 30th of this month.

Still, there is something to the sayings. People who live together develop common habits, common vocabulary... In a sense they do start looking alike, if nothing else, in their mannerisms.

I think the same principle can be applied to houses. Two brothers, Frederick and Alfred Vanderbilt, grew up in the same household; yet as adults their homes were quite different. Both were extravagant and expensive. But Frederick's mansion in New York's fashionable Hyde Park, was built of marble, with tall, Greek columns. It reflected his love of the spotlight.

Alfred's "Sagamore", in the Adirondaks, was built of logs and rough stone. It was a place where people could get away from the glamour and the pace of Manhattan—kick off their shoes—let down their hair.

One was "main street": brass band, sweeping spotlights, the Goodyear blimp; the other was mountain retreat: rustic and quiet. Each reflected who lived inside.

Our epistle reading this morning uses similar imagery:

(1 PETER 2:5-10 NRSV) ...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.

First, note the passive tense: "Let yourselves be built..." We don't build this house, ourselves; nor does God force God's self upon us. In God's love and respect for us human creatures, God waits for an invitation: "...let yourselves be built..."

Second (and this is crucial): note that Peter isn't saying, "...each of you..." He's writing to the church—the whole body of believers gathered and scattered throughout the area known today as Turkey. The personal pronoun is plural: "...let yourselves (in the South we say, "y'all") be built into "a" (singular) spiritual house."

His only reference to individuals is his metaphor of stones that are built into that spiritual house. But until that building takes place, those stones are just unrelated rocks lying on the ground; of no real value until they are gathered and shaped into that "spiritual house". Until then, they're just rocks.

It's interesting that the art of stone masonry in the first century didn't involve the use of mortar or adhesive to hold the stones together. Each stone was custom cut to fit. No two stones were exactly the same; each was cut into a unique shape so it would fit in its place. Each stone's shape was dictated by the shapes of

the other stones immediately surrounding it.

A third thing to note is that this is a transition passage—Peter is laying groundwork for describing the “Household of God.” It’s generally understood that the church is the “spiritual house” that is being built with living stones.

This “spiritual house” isn’t a social club existing for the needs of its members. It’s not a cocoon—an information bubble—in which to hide and escape from people who make us uncomfortable because they’re not like us. Nor is it a religion store, with a paid staff to tend the store and keep the shelves stocked—you know: if you need gas, go to a gas station; if you need groceries, go to a grocery store...

I’ll never forget an elder in a church I was serving... large church, a lot of corporate executives and CEOs and entrepreneurs. Many of them had homes on a lake, and summer attendance dipped significantly as they went to the lake every weekend. I attempted to create a Sunday lake ministry in which, once a month during the summer, one family would be host and the other families could gather, by boat, for fellowship, a lesson, communion. Low key, casual... Church.

This elder said, “Jim, I keep schedules and appointments all week. I go to the lake to get away from any scheduled responsibilities. If I feel the need of religion, I’ll stay home and go to church.” Religion: a consumer product. Drop by the church and pick some up on the way home.

When Dick Hamm was our General Minister and President, he took a sabbatical, during which time he worshiped in more than 50 growing churches around the country, hoping to discover what made them growing and vital. Logic and tradition say great preaching builds great churches; but Dick found that in some of our fastest growing churches the preaching’s lousy, while churches that have great preaching every Sunday are declining.

Many studies suggest that great Sunday School and children’s programs produce growth. Dick found growing churches with ineffective Sunday Schools, and great programs in declining churches.

Great music, friendliness, and well-maintained facilities are assumed to influence growth. Again, Dick found no direct link. Some growing churches had pitiful music; they met in store fronts and nobody spoke to him, while some friendly churches with wonderful music and facilities were declining.

Nor was the style of worship an issue. He worshiped in Black churches and white churches and mixed churches; high church, low church, “blue jean” church, charismatic churches... It didn’t matter. Regardless of the preaching, the music, the style of worship, the building, the programs, or the friendliness, what he found in every growing church was an overwhelming sense of the presence of God in worship!

There is a comfortable image in my mind—warm and soft like the shawl my

grandmother hand-knitted for my grandfather after his stroke.

They lived on a farm west of Ranger, Texas; and my last memories of my grandfather are associated with our visits to that old, drafty, "dust bowl" house where, in the dead of winter, the only heat came from a wood-burning cook stove in the kitchen (where it was always too warm), and a rock fireplace in the parlor (where it was never really warm). I can still see him sitting in a wooden rocker in front of that fireplace, wearing those faded, brown slippers, his lifeless legs draped with a hand-made quilt, that shawl snuggled around his shoulders.

My sister and I loved to listen to his stories about his days as a cowpuncher along the old Cimarron Trail. I'd seen my grandfather sitting "tall in the saddle" riding out in the late afternoon to bring in the cows for milking. But in these final memories his body hardly functioned at all; he barely could feed himself. But when he told those stories, his face danced, the spark returned to his dim eyes, and the words skipped across his tongue like a schoolgirl playing hopscotch.

All too soon it would be time for bed. We'd put on flannel pajamas and back up to the fireplace until they were almost ablaze, then run and try to jump into bed before they cooled down. Grandmother would heat a brick on the hearth and wrap it in a towel and put it under the covers at our feet. And there were so many quilts piled on the bed that our toes would get sore from holding them up; but it never worked. We were always cold.

Still, memories of that drafty old house are warm and cozy, and a trip to Granddaddy's house was always preceded by excited anticipation.

Sometimes there was food enough "for Cox's Army" (according to Grandmother); other times it was red beans and cornbread—maybe a little bacon. It didn't matter what we ate. That's not what drew me there.

Sometimes there would be lots of people—cousins for me to play with, aunts and uncles—people I didn't know. Some of them paid attention to me; some of them didn't. It didn't matter; that's not what drew me there.

Sometimes we'd gather around an old upright piano and my mom would play and we'd all sing (the same upright piano that today is in our eldest son's living room). It was great, but that's not what drew me there.

I was filled with anticipation before every trip to Granddaddy's house, not because of the structure, not because of anything exciting that went on inside, but because of who lived there.