

To Taste the Goodness of God

<p>(1PETER 2:2-10 NIV) <i>Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- ⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ⁷Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to</i></p>	<p><i>those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," ⁸and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message--which is also what they were destined for. ⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.</i></p>
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I was in the supermarket the other day, and on one of the aisles my eye was caught by a splash of color, and I looked, and it was a package of dried prunes. A whole section of the shelf was given over to dried fruit: apricots, pears, **and prunes**, all neatly packaged in cellophane bags, made to look as attractive as possible. It worked. It caught my eye. I would **not** have been looking for dried prunes! No matter how attractive the package, there's just not much you can do for dried prunes; and I doubt many people buy them except for very specific reasons.

And I thought of the church. [No! Not that!] Now, you've already jumped ahead of me. Sitting there in their attractive packages, all in neat rows, these dried prunes seemed to be saying, "Take some. We're good for you. You may not like us, but we're good for you." **SO**--with a sense of duty--some people chew the prunes.

In the same way--out of a sense of duty--some people get involved with the activities and the work of the church. Dried prunes are dried prunes, no matter how you package it. "You may not like it; it may be totally boring and the work may be an intrusion on your life, but it's good for you. I think."

More and more pews turn up empty each year. And like brothers and sisters in a large family, when things start going bad, the top priority is, "Who's fault is it?" Usually, the minister is blamed. Clergy burnout is a growing concern; and forced termination of ministries increased **600%** between 1980 and 2000.

Other criticisms are less clear: general, blanket indictments: "Well, 'the church' is irrelevant; 'the church' isn't caring; 'the church' has turned inward; "I'm not being fed;" 'the church' this and 'the church' that."

Somehow that's not the picture I get when I read the New Testament. I see other images:

- **Salt** that seasons the stew...

- **Yeast** that leavens the loaf...
- **Lilies** of the field, how they grow...
- **Wildflowers** splashing color on a drab hillside...
- **Light** shining in the dark, shadowy corners of life...
- **Water of Life**, sparkling, gurgling like a mountain stream...
- **Searchers** eagerly and regularly coming together to love each other and encourage each other and celebrate Word and Sacrament as a source of strength; and then going back where they work, and play, and go to school, and live, and there make visible in their lives the presence and love of Jesus Christ.

Those are the images I get from the New Testament. And today's epistle lesson: *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."*

Do you remember the question Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do people say I, the Son of Man, am?" And the Disciples answered, "Some say Elijah or one of the prophets come back to life;" "Some say this, and some say that..."

And then Jesus shifted gears: "But who do you say that I am?"

Maybe it's not too big a stretch to imagine Jesus standing before us this morning and asking us: "What do people say the church is?" How would we answer? Probably, in our circle of friends and loved ones, most people would have something good to say about the church. But if we were to venture out into the community at large... talk to some of the students at UCA, wander around downtown during Toad Suck Daze, talking to total strangers... go down to the welfare office and talk to some of those people waiting their turn... "Talk to me about the church." "What do you think of the church?" What are people saying about the church?

Then, imagine Jesus looking each of us in the eye and asking, "And what do you say the church is?" How would you respond?

Would your response be significantly different from those comments gleaned from the UCA Campus or the Toad Suck Daze?

And then, imagine Jesus turning to a group of Southern Baptists, and asking the same questions; and then turning to some Presbyterians, and then some Methodists and Catholics and some people from the Assemblies of God. Imagine Jesus going down to Houston and asking the same questions from some people from Lakewood Church, who listen to Joel Osteen's "Prosperity Gospel" every Sunday.

Now, imagine a spiritually hungry public trying to make sense out of the dissonance—the utter confusion of differing messages; the conflicting, contradictory voices clamoring for attention and affirmation: "Take some. We're good for you. You

may not like us, but we're good for you."

You've heard me before, quoting Thomas G. Bandy: "The largest and fastest growing spiritual population in North America is the spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public." Almost 2,000 years earlier, Paul describes that same population like this: "*The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own.*" (ROMANS 8:19 JBP) They demand authenticity and integrity; and whether those things are present in any given congregation or denomination, they're not seeing it in the church. And they will not "chew the prunes."

But there is Good News, both for the church and for those who stand on tiptoe waiting for us to get our act together. In a sentence full of metaphors, Peter writes, "*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation...*"

Both Paul, In I Corinthians (3:2), and the writer of Hebrews (5:12-13) also use the metaphor of milk, and the writer of Hebrews identifies it as "the word of righteousness."

Peter describes that word as **pure**. In the original language word means, not deceitful. Dishonest merchants would add water to their milk to make more profit. This was "deceitful" milk. Peter tells us to long for the pure, not-deceitful milk.

This word of righteousness tells you the honest truth about yourself. We tend to deceive and flatter ourselves. But the word of righteousness cuts through the deception and lays out the honest truth so that we can deal with our issues.

There are legions of churches in which the word of righteousness is watered down by upbeat preachers who want to be liked and who want to make everybody feel good about themselves. But that's like going to a doctor who doesn't talk about sickness, but who gives his patients sugar-coated pills that make them feel good without dealing with the root cause of their problems. And a "spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public" isn't buying it. Nor should we. The word of righteousness is a message of integrity and authenticity.

And Peter says this milk is **rational**. The NRSV uses the word "spiritual." In the original language the word is "logikos"—from the same root as the word, "Logos": in the beginning was the "logos." The only other time this occurs in the Bible is in Romans 12:1, where Paul says that presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to God is our "spiritual (or rational or reasonable) service of worship."

There's no hocus pocus here. This spiritual milk is rational—it can be grasped with the mind: understood. We cannot know God without using our minds; so don't check your brain at the door when you come in.

I know Christians who are heavily subjective. They operate on a feeling level,

to the neglect of solid theological content. Others emphasize theological content, but are afraid of emotions. The word of righteousness is rational—balanced. It can fill our minds with the knowledge of God and also move our hearts in response.

And Peter says this milk is **nourishing**. A mother's milk will make her baby grow for months with no other food. The "pure, spiritual milk" of which Peter writes will nourish Christians so that they "grow toward salvation" (2:2).

In almost every home where there are children, there will be a door frame somewhere with pencil marks on it—with maybe a date written beside each mark. Kids are excited about growing. Every few months a new mark is added to the door frame: "Wow, look how much you've grown since last time!"

Grow is a natural phenomenon. All healthy, living things grow; and that growth is predetermined by genetics. Peter says we are growing toward our salvation: a natural growth process toward the fulfillment of our spiritual genetics, which Peter identifies like this: *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."*

Note that this identity corporate, not individual. It is the corporate experience of Christ that produces church. The Individual experience of Christ produces salvation; but Peter has moved beyond that. That's already happened to those who will be reading Peter's letter. Peter addresses the issue, now that we have tasted the goodness of God, what next?

I think the "spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public"—indeed, all creation is waiting to see how we will respond to that question: "What's next?"