

DUDE, WHERE'S MY CHURCH?

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. For it stands in scripture:

*"See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to
shame."*

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

*"The stone that the builders rejected has
become the very head of the corner,"
and "A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall."*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain

*from the desires of the flesh that wage war against
the soul.* (1 Peter 2:1-11, NRSV)

In the year 2000, a groundbreaking movie of epic proportions was released. Okay, maybe not a groundbreaking movie of epic proportions, how about a classic of modern cinema? That's not right either. I've got it. In the year 2000, an average, slightly lame, teen comedy was released, that offered a few gross-out laughs and very little in the way of coherent plot: its title, "Dude, Where's My Car?"

In the movie, two pizza delivery guys, Jesse and Chester, wake up to find that the night before they apparently trashed their girlfriends' house, got tattoos, stole \$200,000 from a stripper, got in the middle of an extra-terrestrial war, acquired a year's supply of pudding and--oh yeah--misplaced their car. We're left to assume that they partied a little too hard last night, and what little humor the movie provides comes as the two hapless "dudes" try to figure out the mess they're in.

Call it the Rip Van Winkle story for the new millennium. It works off of a theme common in literature of a character (or characters) waking up to the disorienting feeling that the world has changed while he or she slept. The absurdity of this movie's title has been co-opted in a number of ways, most notably in Michael Moore's best-selling book, *Dude, Where's My Country?* (I haven't read this book yet, but I've received numerous recommendations of it from friends who are Democrats.) Well, since I'm never one to let a bandwagon pass me by, I felt like I should co-opt this "Dude, Where's My ____" phenomenon for my own purposes, because I've been pinching myself lately and hoping that I would wake up as I pick through headlines. Either I hear people who claim to be Christians showing up at the worst

times to say the worst things, or I witness events filled with pain and sorrow with no Christians to be found. I've begun to mutter to myself, "Dude, where's my church?"

This muttered question has reminded me of a joke I once shared with friends in seminary. Back when the TV show *ER* was still fresh, my friends and I (all prospective ministers) would watch it. In every episode, there would be an inevitable scene where, despite their best efforts, the emergency room doctors would fail to save the life of a patient. (The patient usually was a small innocent child or the single mother of numerous small innocent children or the grandmother of numerous small innocent children whose single mother had already died, etc.) George Clooney or Noah Wyle would come out in their blood-spattered scrubs to inform the family members that "they did all they could do" and that he "was sorry for their loss." Then the camera would slowly pan backwards as the grieving family members wept. My friends and I would quickly turn to each other and say, "Where's the hospital chaplain?" Those among us who spent time working as hospital chaplains knew from experience that in real life, most hospitals would have had a chaplain or other professional there immediately to help the family deal with their emotional and spiritual pain. We would curse the fictional corporate conglomerate that had bought the fictional hospital and eliminated their fictional pastoral care department. Pretty soon, every accident or mistake in real life (not just on *ER*) became an excuse for us to yell at each other, "Somebody page the chaplain!"

I've come to wish there was some chaplain whom could be called wherever people are hurting. This person could provide comfort and support wherever there is pain or trauma. A one-size-fits-all chaplain does not exist, of course, but the church does. So, where is the church when people are hurting?

Before Hurricane Charley blew away all the other headlines this week, there were two stories about storms of another kind. The first was the story of New Jersey governor James McGreevey, who, as one paper put it, came out of the closet and out of office. The second was the story of the California Supreme Court voiding gay marriages licensed by the mayor of San Francisco. Beyond all of the legal issues in California and the many scandalous and salacious actions of McGreevey, I found myself struck by the profound human pain in both stories. I was moved by the pain of the same-sex couples gathered on the steps of the Supreme Court and the tragedy of a man who felt he had to lie about his own identity—a lie that encompassed not only him but also his wife and children. In each of these cases, I looked for Christians that were present and ready to help these people to get through their pain. The only Christians I saw, however, were the usual suspects like Jerry Falwell, who were quick to move past the humanity of these people in order to offer words of condemnation. I wondered where was the chaplain for these hurting people. Where was their minister? Where was the church?

Once Hurricane Charley arrived and in the daylight yesterday we could truly see the damage—specifically the toll in human lives—I thought back to televangelist Pat Robertson, who on two occasions claimed that his prayers had diverted the path of hurricanes away from his Virginia Beach headquarters, never mind the damage they did elsewhere. I wondered if he would claim that the people of Florida did not pray hard enough, or perhaps the people of Tampa prayed harder than the people of Punta Gorda, thereby altering the path of the storm. I am sure that chaplains, ministers and churches will be helping in the clean-up in Florida, but I hope they subscribe to a less arrogant theology than Pat Robertson.¹

Whether it's a televangelist stroking his own ego (and checkbook) or a presidential candidate clumsily quoting scripture (Kerry and Bush are both guilty of this charge, by the way.),² it seems the Christian faith has little to say to a hurting world beyond condemnation, arrogance or a political ploy. Does the good news of Jesus Christ have nothing to offer our culture? Does the church have no word for a hurting world? Dude, where's my church?

In today's scripture, we find directions that point us towards where church can be found. It is not only a general view of the church in a universal sense but an expectation of what individual faith communities like ours should be. The writer, who identifies himself as the Apostle Peter, (1:1)³ declares that if you have had a taste of God and found that God does indeed nourish your deepest spiritual needs (verses 2 and 3), then you will feel a natural attraction to what others have thrown away. You will have new eyes to see that what others do not value, God values. Chief among these things ignored by the world is Jesus Christ.

The writer uses the image of building stones to explain the difference Christ makes in our world. He writes that Christ is like a stone rejected by a builder—it becomes another piece of refuse to be thrown in a dumpster and taken to a land fill—but God picks up this rejected stone and uses it as the cornerstone for God's temple. In the same way, Christ was rejected and tossed aside by the powerful people and the religious people of his day, but in Christ, God conquered sin and death, establishing a new community of faith. At the heart of Christianity is the story of a man rejected, cursed and victimized, a man of no value in the eyes of his contemporaries who ends up being of immense value to God. Therefore one would think that we, as Christians, would learn that God is interested in what gets thrown away. When a human life is considered worthless by our world, God says,

“Wait! I will take that rejected stone and use it to build something wonderful.”

You might say that God is in the recycling business. God reclaims the lives that others have tossed aside. The writer of 1 Peter describes Christians as “living stones,” that God can use in God’s plans to build a better world. Like an artist who picks through piles of junk to find pieces for a beautiful sculpture, God moves amid the ruins of people’s lives to pick up the pieces and include them in God’s marvelous work. This is the good news that the church should be proclaiming to the world: no matter who you are and what you have done, you are of immense value to God.

To the woman who has been down-sized and seen her job go overseas, the church should declare that your worth is not found in your resume. God can use you to do great things.

To the man who has had an affair or has bounced from one bad romance to another, the church should declare that your worth is not found in whom you are sleeping with. God can use you to do great things.

To the child of the inner city who knows the threat of violence and the scourge of drugs, the church should declare that your worth is not found in the prejudice you experience or the abuse you must endure. God can use you to do great things.

To the child of the suburb who is numbed to the pleasure and the pain of the world by the material excess he or she has been given, the church should declare that your worth is not found in what clothes you wear or what car you drive. God can use you to do great things.

This is the good news we, as the church, have to offer a world full of hurting people. Why do we keep it to

ourselves? Perhaps it is because we have forgotten who we are.

In today's scripture passage, the writer declares who we are. We as Christians are a "royal priesthood," "a chosen race"⁴ (verse 9) and "aliens and strangers." (verse 11) All of these titles were used in Hebrew scriptures in regards to Israel and its role among the nations, a people set apart not for privilege but for use in God's care for the world.⁵ Here the writer applies them also to Christians. As Christians, we also have been set apart, not because we are better than anyone else, but precisely because we are just like everyone else. We are just as bad, just as lazy, and just as destructive as everyone else. Yet, God chooses to use us to help hurting people know that they too can be useful to God.

One of the earliest criticisms leveled at Christians was that they allowed anyone to be a part of the Church. They "wasted" their time upon people who were of no account: women, children, slaves, the uneducated, and the poor.⁶ What kind of people were these Christians that they would include the worthless rabble of the world? They were people who would take in anyone, especially those who had nowhere else to go. These so-called "chosen" people included the heartbroken, the rejected, the lonely and the despised. Christians showed people who had no value in society that they had incredible value to God.⁷ Has the church forgotten its historic duty in this regard?

As the church, we are called to operate in a different manner than our culture. We are called to care for those who are voted off the island, not just those who win the game. We are called to care for those who have skeletons in their closets, not just those who claim to have nothing to hide. We are called to care for those who have no voice in the political debates of our day, not just those who have the largest fund-raising apparatus. We are called to be in the

business of helping people who have been rejected fit into God's marvelous plan.

Dude, where's my church? The church is wherever hurting and rejected people find comfort, grace and love.

Rev. Chase Peoples

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 15, 2004

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, you are the creator of our community, help us to remember who we are meant to be, a people of faith, love and grace. Unite us in one purpose: to love people, especially those who are dispossessed, so that all who hurt might know that the Church is where they can go to find acceptance and a place to belong. Whether the storms of life come in the form of hurricanes or sinful acts, help us as Christians to be present with words of hope and acts of grace. Thank you for putting the broken pieces of our lives back together. Amen

¹ Sarah Pollock, "How Prayer Turned Back Historic Hurricanes," September 16, 2003 CBN News,

<http://www.cbn.com/CBNNews/News/030916c.asp>. In his criticisms of The Walt Disney Company, Robertson has warned that Disney's actions will expose the Orlando area to danger from hurricanes and other calamities. Given that hurricane Charley caused massive damage around Orlando, I hope that as the people of Orlando recover they will encounter

Christians with a better understanding of God’s grace than that of Robertson. See “Rainbow Flags May Bring Hurricane to Orlando—and Maybe a Meteor, Warns TV Preacher Pat Robertson,” June 9, 1998 press release from Americans United for the Separation of Church and State: http://www.au.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6134&abbr=pr&JServSessionIdr012=arwho8ck21.app1b&news_iv_ctrl=1508

² One of the best comments I’ve read on whether or not the private faith of presidential candidates influences their public politics comes from Will Willimon, Dean of the Duke University Chapel, who said during a recent Palm Sunday sermon, “During the last presidential election, there was debate about Senator Lieberman. ‘He’s a devout Jew,’ some said. ‘He keeps Kosher. If we have a national crisis and need to go to war on a Saturday, could we count on Lieberman?’ Nobody said, ‘George Bush is a Methodist, Al Gore is a Baptist, don’t these Christians have some funny ideas about violence? Can we count on them to kick butt when we need it?’ Nobody asked because, well, when it comes to such issues, you can’t tell the worshippers of Caesar from the devotees of Jesus.” *The Christian Century* (May 4, 2004), 7.

³ Scholars debate whether or not the author really was Peter, the apostle, described in the Gospels. I’ve chosen to simply refer to the author as “the writer,” because the arguments for and against Petrine authorship are inconclusive. For a brief overview of the arguments involved, see Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999): 480-481.

⁴ In American culture today, the concept of “race” has become a lightning rod for controversy. In the case of scripture and its many interpretations, declarations of who is an insider or one of the chosen and who is an outsider have led to a variety of positive and negative consequences. I would argue that the social location of the reader has much to do with how the verse is interpreted. If, like the readers inferred by the text, a reader is on the bottom rung of society’s ladder, writings like 1 Peter would offer much hope. But if the reader is a part of a powerful majority, such language might merely confirm their own oppressive actions. If you combine the history of Christian inclusion/exclusion with modern discussions of race, the use of “chosen race” in verse 9 may prove problematic for today’s readers. Although I do not wish to ignore the concerns of some contemporary interpreters, I do agree with the sentiments of David Bartlett: “To be sure, some are in and some are out. But every Christian remembers that only yesterday he or she was out and that only by God’s grace has been brought in, received mercy, made a member of God’s people. In the great story God has authored and continues to author, who knows who will find mercy and light tomorrow, who will next be included in God’s dear people?”

... Whatever our reaction to the exclusiveness of the claim that Christians are God's own (only?) people—by no means unique to 1 Peter in Christian literature—the positive side makes its claim in our generation as in the generation for which the epistle was written. For believers, Christian identity *is* our identity. Christian community is our community, and Christian family our family. Especially in a time of ongoing racial tension Christians rightly recall that as Christians (not as Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, or Asian people) we are a chosen race. For Christians who take 1 Peter seriously, the line on the application that asks for race ought to be filled in: “Christian.” David Bartlett, “The First Letter of Peter” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998): 269

⁵ Examples can be found in Exodus 19, Leviticus 19 and Isaiah 43.

⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 3.59.

⁷ John Elliott provides an excellent discussion of this process in his classic work on 1 Peter, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981): 120-129. He notes, “For the Christian community, in other words, there exists a different standard of values, namely the will of God and the exemplary obedience of Jesus Christ, which distinguishes it from outside society. In the estimation of the Gentiles the Christians amount only to a motley collection of lowly aliens, ignoble slaves, religious fanatics and “Christ-lackeys” obsessed with self-humiliation. Within the family of God, however, and in God's estimation, Christians enjoy a new status...” (128)