

“Who are We? We are the Living, Breathing Church”

1 Peter 2:1-12

As we move forward in our life together as Oak Grove Mennonite Church, one of the questions that we need to be able to answer is this: who are we? What is our identity at Oak Grove, and what does that identity mean to us without a lead pastor in place. To answer that question, we have to first answer the question, what is the church? Is the church the building, it is the conference, or the denomination, or the movement? Is it Catholic or Protestant or maybe even Orthodox? Is it global or local, contemporary or traditional, or somewhere in between? This morning, we are going to reflect on that question by looking at the identity of the church as found in 1 Peter 2:1-12. Peter’s primary message here is this: We are the living breathing church, made up of different people with different gifts coming together to be the people of God.

Let’s begin by exploring the 6 qualities of a living, breathing church found in 1 Peter.

6 Qualities of a Living, Breathing Church

1) The living, breathing church is Diverse.

Peacemaker and Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Capetown, South Africa, Desmond Tutu said: “Isn't it amazing that we are all made in God's image, and yet there is so much diversity among his people?” The world around us is as diverse as the colors of the rainbow, the snowflakes in the sky, or the shape of the individual grains of sand by the seashore. And a living, breathing church should be reflective of that diverse world.

Let’s consider Peter’s metaphor, that we are “living stones,” we are the building material used to make God’s church. I’ve always loved stone houses. There’s something really earthy and timeless about seeing a stone house. But maybe what’s most intriguing to me about them is that each home is unique because the shape of each stone is unique. Even if the builder were really intentional about selecting stones of roughly the same shape and roughly the same size, in fact even if the builder were able to cut the stones to an approximate shape and size, each stone would still have its own unique coloring, markings, and blemishes.

Like a stone house, God’s church is built of unique and diverse people, of all different spiritual shapes and sizes. Paul writes about diversity in the church in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, comparing the church to a body: *“¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”*

So in this passage, Paul is highlighting the diverse nature of the church that also manages to function as a whole and complete entity. Just like the body, the church is made up of different parts: hands and fingers, feet and toes, muscles, joints, and ligaments, skin and bones, heart and organs. Each of these parts is unique and diverse in their composition, and yet they also

work together for the health, wellness, and wholeness of the body. Their diversity is in fact necessary for the body to function right. This leads us to our second point.

2) The living breathing church is **Complementary**.

The church is made up of diverse persons, but in their diversity they have to also be complementary. Paul continues with his metaphor of the body in 1 Corinthians 12:18-20, writing: ¹⁸ *But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.* ¹⁹ *If they were all one part, where would the body be?* ²⁰ *As it is, there are many parts, but one body.*

Picture that you were building a stone house, and you had all of your building material laid out before you, with stones of various shapes and sizes. At first glance, it might just appear like a jumbled mess of rock. But as you sift through the materials, stone by stone, you could find some shapes and sizes that seem to fit well together, not only so that the structure is sturdy and safe but so that the façade looks well-ordered and pleasing.

I imagine that as God builds his church with diverse and unique human beings, he finds ways to put our complementary shapes together, so that we look representative of the world that we come from and so that we can work well together, which each stone complementing the other stones around them.

Transition: Even considering how we might complement one another, it can still be tempting to allow our diversity to separate us. So what holds the diverse and complementary body of the church together?

3) The living, breathing church is **Bonded by the Holy Spirit**.

Stone houses aren't built simply by stacking piles of rock on each other and hoping that the structure doesn't collapse in on the owner of the house. There also needs to be a mortar, a bonding agent that holds the stones together and fills in those places where the stones, even though they are complementary, don't quite fit. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells us in John 14:15-17, that after he died and went back into heaven, the Holy Spirit came as God's presence to be with us on earth.

John 14:15-17

¹⁵ *"If you love me, keep my commands.* ¹⁶ *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—* ¹⁷ *the Spirit of truth.*

The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, meaning that it is working on our behalf, to help us and be with us forever. So, the Holy Spirit is God with us now today, not only to help us individually as disciples, but to help us together as the Church. **Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:3:**

³ *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

Peace binds us in the unity of the Spirit; we recognize that even though we are a diverse and

complementary group made up of many different people with many different roles and gifts, we are united together in the oneness of the God we follow.

4) The living, breathing church is Mission-Oriented.

God gathered together this diverse, complementary group of people bonded together by the Holy Spirit for His mission here on earth. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:9 that we, as living stones, have been made into God's people with a purpose: *⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* For you grammar-minded people, in this verse, Peter uses the all-important *conjunction*, a word that connects two clauses, "that" or "so that," which indicates purpose. He says that God made this living breathing church **so that** his mission could be carried out in the world.

This is really important; we need to hear this if we are to understand the identity of the church. God did not create the church for the purpose of **just being** the church. And God did not create the mission just to give the church something to do. God had the mission, that is to share the Gospel and bring the separated world back to himself, and he created the church to carry out that mission.

5) The living, breathing church is Dynamic (not Static)

For Jewish Christians, the temple stood as the physical spiritual house where God lived and dwelled. So many verses in the Old Testament are dedicated to painstaking descriptions of the temple and its dimensions and its building materials. But those stones, and those cedars, and the inlay and overlay of gold and silver, as beautiful and majestic as they were, were not alive. The temple was a testimony to the holiness of God, but the temple itself was only Holy because of the presence of God.

Jesus was pretty shockingly clear that the temple as the physical place of the worship of God would be destroyed. It was through his life, death, and resurrection, that Jesus would dismantle the Temple.

Mark 13:1-2

¹Then as He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" ²And Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Jesus' message here was that the temple destruction would be an ultimate and final sign that the good news was meant for all people, that all people had the right to become children of God; the temple which had begun as a place of worship and had turned into a prison of the gospel was torn down, and the church which had been a static, unmoving, unchanging, and not to be shared with others, was **DYNAMIC**. It was alive!

What does it mean for the church today to be living and dynamic? It means that firstly, the church is not a "temple." It is not a place to house and keep God from the rest of the world.

The church is the people. But it isn't the people who stand still, get comfortable, or get too rooted in tradition to follow after God's movement.

Ironically, we are all Gentiles, descendants of those original non-Jewish Christians. And yet we want to be temple-builders. We want to make our buildings and trap God inside. We want to make the world come to us rather than to go out into the world. But if we want to be the living, breathing church that God has called us to be, we cannot be afraid to follow the dynamic movement of God.

6) The living, breathing church is **Inclusive:**

The final important quality of the living, breathing church is that it is inclusive. It's really interesting that Peter uses the image of the "House" or "Temple" to describe the gathered body of believers as a church because to the Jews, the temple represented the exclusivity of their faith. The temple was made up of layers of courts, from the outside to the inside, which kept those considered unworthy away from the center, the Holy of Holies, and women and Gentiles weren't allowed any closer than the outside court.

So, why did Peter use the image of the temple to describe the church? The church being a temple made of living stones changes and redeems the **exclusivity** of the temple into an **inclusive** body of diverse and complementary persons. **1 Peter 2:10**: Once 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.

Transition: So now that we understand the church's identity to be diverse, complementary, and inclusive to all people who would call on the name of Jesus, bonded together by the Holy Spirit and created for dynamic mission, let's quickly look at 4 important practices of a living, breathing Church.

4 Practices of a Living, Breathing Church

1) Use our spiritual gifts

The living breathing church should be using their diversity of complementary gifts to serve the kingdom of God. Now this could happen within the body and for the purpose of worship or teaching, but we should also be using our gifts in the places that we live, work, and play. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:4 and 7: ⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

2) Have conversations

The living breathing church should be having conversations with one another about what it means to be church together and how to be a faithful witness to the world today. We live in a society that has forgotten how to have healthy conversations with each other, and Christians can oftentimes be the worst offenders. We need to relearn to speak to one another about important things with the grace of Jesus. **1 Peter 4:11** ¹¹ *If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God.*

3) Offer Hospitality

The living breathing church should be regularly practicing hospitality, both to one another and to our neighbors, the people we see in the places we live, work, and play. **1 Peter 4:9** ⁹ *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* How often do we invite people from our small group, from our Sunday school class, from down the street, and from the coffee shop into our homes? What impact might we have on the people around us if we became just a little more hospitable? Erin and I have a futon, an air mattress, and a basket with sheets, blankets, and pillows ready to go in case anybody would drop by and need a place to stay, and they get used on a fairly regular basis. Now, I won't lie and say that we don't grumble if our houseguests don't give us a reasonable heads-up, but we do consider hospitality to be a gift that we can share with others.

4) Become Disciples and Disciple others

Finally, the living breathing church should be made-up of disciples who are making disciples. Now, this is far too big of a topic to cover today, but it needs to be said that if we truly want to be "living stones," then we have to be actively growing more and more into the image of Jesus, and we have to be actively helping others in their journey towards becoming like Jesus. Jesus' final words to His followers in **Matthew 28:19** ¹⁹ *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...* It doesn't say go and make converts of all nations; it says to make disciples, persons committed to following and imitating Jesus. And we are called to walk alongside them in the journey of discipleship, which is a much longer and deeper effort than is often talked about at church. The truth is, if we aren't disciples making disciples, then we aren't being who Jesus has called us to be.

Using our spiritual gifts, having conversations, practicing hospitality, and becoming disciples who make disciples; these are four practices of the living, breathing church, but they are by no means the only four practices. I do however believe they offer a pretty good start for living into our identity.

Chris Smith writes in his book "How the Body of Christ Talks": "We read familiar passages about being the body of Christ, about bearing one another's burdens, and even about loving our enemies, but we have little imagination for how to embody these convictions in the everyday lives of our church communities." As we continue to explore our identity as "living stones" built into spiritual house of God and answer the question "who are we," let's be challenged to get a little uncomfortable with where we are at and to use our imaginations as we live out these questions.