

Colin Puckett
Sermon
May 22, 2011

Good morning. It truly is an honor to give the sermon this morning, but this is also a bittersweet experience for me. Up until this point in my life I've always lived here in Chesterfield and been fortunate enough to be part of the tight-knit community of St. John's. While I've spent the last four years of school in Richmond at Maggie Walker Governor's School, and while the hectic schedule of academics, athletics, music, and other commitments that I have subjected myself to has drawn time away from my involvement with the church, this amazing Christian community has remained an integral part of my life. Now, with only a few weeks until my graduation and only a few months until I leave for college, I feel both the exhilaration of entering a new chapter of my life and the sorrow of being withdrawn from a place and a group of people for whom I care deeply.

It would indeed be a daunting task to try to find a church community that better embodies the spirit of today's lesson from the First Epistle of Peter. Peter calls on us as Christians to be "living stones," "chosen and precious in God's sight" and to let ourselves "be built into a spiritual house." How true we see this mission lived out in St. John's! This is a group of kind, generous, warm-hearted folk that unites in the spirit of Christ's love to celebrate the blessing of new life that He has bestowed upon us. We trust in the steadfast cornerstone of the Lord and build upon His foundation, each of us serving as another stone in our house of worship.

Each living stone, each member of our church, serves both a practical and a spiritual purpose. Everyone sacrifices their time and effort, whether it is through working in the church office or serving on the vestry, volunteering time as a musician, a Sunday school teacher, an acolyte, a lector, or an usher, or simply contributing to the offering. Everyone contributes to the functioning of this church, and we would be lacking without that contribution, just as a building with holes in its walls is less of a building. More importantly, however, each of us as a living stone forms part of the collective spiritual community of St. John's; each gives not only his or her time, effort, or resources to allow the church to function physically, but also of his or her heart. The generosity and kindness that each exudes contributes to the overall atmosphere of Christian love and fellowship without which our church would not be able to serve its purpose.

Now, in a discussion of our church community as a spiritual house, I cannot help but draw upon what I have learned through my school's senior seminar in architecture that I have taken this past year. Specifically, I thought it would be appropriate to mention the three guiding principles of architecture as stated by Vitruvius, the ancient Roman engineer who wrote the first comprehensive volume on the art of design and construction, three principles which are widely considered to be the ideals any good building should embody. They are *utility*, *attractiveness*, and *soundness*. It is my conviction that these three core principles are as essential to a figurative building in the spiritual sense as they are to an actual physical structure.

First off, *utility*, or purpose, is what renders architecture worthwhile. One doesn't construct a house to simply gaze upon, and one does not form a church just to have somewhere to go every Sunday morning. No, clearly a physical building and our own

spiritual house would be worthless if they served no purpose, and if you think about it, our community here at St. John's serves the greatest purpose of all: to know God and to do God's will.

We fulfill this holy purpose by coming together in worship and Christian fellowship, thereby providing a medium through which people can come to know and experience God, as well as by reaching out and being faithful servants to our neighbors in the community. Year round, one need only glance briefly at the bulletin to see evidence of our outreach and volunteerism. We fill backpacks to provide needy children with the resources they need for school, we stuff bags of food so that those less fortunate can have a proper Thanksgiving meal, we host dinners to raise funds for charities, we help provide decent housing to the disadvantaged in our community through volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, we send our youth on annual mission trips, and that is just scratching the surface. I sincerely wish that I had personally been able to offer more of my time to the many honorable undertakings in which our church becomes involved. I remember back seven years ago, when I participated in the KARITAS-sponsored "Night on the Streets," raising money for charity and then spending a night sleeping out in the church parking lot in a cardboard box, in solidarity with the many homeless of the Richmond area. The feeling of making some slight difference in the world felt so great that I barely minded the frigid cold that night. Although the stressful nature of my high school schedule has left me little time, I have still tried to help out when I can, such as volunteering last year with Elder Homes to build a path for a wheelchair-bound woman to get to her driveway. I am extremely proud to be a part of a church community that is so committed to helping our neighbors. I hope that as I leave this place and head off to college I will be able to find time to volunteer and fulfill God's will by being a faithful servant to those less fortunate than me.

The second core principle of architecture is *attractiveness*, or beauty. Surely our spiritual house is a thing of great beauty, for it is built upon the foundation of God's love to which nothing else can compare in sheer magnificence. I see that beauty in the smiles of our congregation as we greet each other Sunday morning, in the warm handshakes and cheerful conversations during the peace, and in the overall aura of fellowship that fills this church, all of which I will severely miss. Certainly this spiritual house is attractive, for why else would we return week after week if not for our affinity towards this beautiful spirit of love and fellowship?

Vitruvius' final principle of architecture is *soundness*, or durability. A good building must be able to last and withstand the elements. Well, what is more long-lasting than God's eternal love? Our spiritual house is more durable and persistent than any physical structure, for even if this church one day vanishes from the earth, this community will live on forever in the blessing of everlasting life through Christ's sacrifice, joining the holy company of heaven in ceaseless joy and praise to God.

Therefore, the guiding ideals of architecture may be even more relevant to our church, our spiritual house, than to any manmade physical building, and this wonderful community of St. John's is a perfect example of the type of figurative temple that Peter describes. We are each a living stone, and together we form a holy structure that is purposeful, beautiful, and lasting.

Growing up surrounded by this warm and inviting group of people has definitely had a major impact on my life. For one thing, I believe that being exposed to the

Christian love and unity of this church since birth has made me a friendlier and kinder individual overall. I have always tried to be the most compassionate and polite person I can be, because that is what my experience at St. John's has taught me a good Christian is meant to be, and I at least hope that I have been somewhat successful.

Furthermore, I have developed a sense of obligation to my community and my peers, no doubt from having grown up in a church that considers service and outreach as essential to our relationship with God. Although my school does require a certain amount of community service for graduation, I have gone well beyond my necessary hours, helping out over the summer at the Chesterfield County Library or with the residents of the Lucy Corr Village retirement community, as well as through many other various organizations. This attitude extends to my more formal commitments, such as cross country and track. I have given my all to running and trained hard, even over summer vacation, not only out of personal aspirations of success, but because I knew that the team's ability to be competitive in our district depended partially on me. As a captain this year, I tried to go beyond my basic responsibilities, diligently managing the team email account and staying in touch with new members, as well as helping plan fun events like LaserQuest to promote team bonding. In that same sense of kindness and compassion, I tried to reach out to the new members to make them feel as welcome and as comfortable as possible. I felt it was my duty to help everyone achieve the most rewarding experience possible. Without St. John's, I doubt I would have felt this same devotion to my teammates.

Finally, I feel that my experience with St. John's, worshipping alongside all of you for many years, has helped me develop a more open mind and a deeper sense of empathy towards others. I believe there is an awful perception some people have of Christians that we tend to be severe and judgmental of others. Well, St. John's has completely disproved this stereotype. I don't believe you'd be able to find a church that is more open and inviting. The fact that saying the peace seems to take longer every week is perfect evidence of the warm and welcoming spirit of the congregation. As I see it, our church has never been one to point the finger of judgment, but rather extend a welcoming hand.

Coming into high school, I stepped into a very diverse group of people, and through classes like world religions and cultural celebrations like my school's Asian Assembly, as well as simply becoming friends with people of different political and spiritual mindsets, I feel that I have become better at understanding and empathizing with others. While Jesus Christ is most certainly "the way, the truth, and the life," as emphasized in today's gospel, we are also called upon in the Bible to be respectful towards others who think differently from ourselves. In Peter's first epistle, shortly beyond today's reading, we are instructed to "show proper respect to everyone." Just as Peter taught Christians living in the Roman Empire to "live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us," rather than be judgmental, we should behave with respect to others, even if we consider their beliefs to be completely wrong, and demonstrate God's love through our actions.

As I depart from this stage of my life and enter the completely new realm of college, I will be faced with new obstacles every day. Among them will be the exposure to a great multitude of people with completely different beliefs and opinions. However,

with a sense of compassion, dedication, empathy, and respect and a strong faith in Christ's love that I have developed here at St. John's, I know that I will be able to succeed and feel at home among new people, and that I will never be alone with Jesus there for me every step of the way. Being a member of St. John's has been a magnificent experience and a major part of my life, and although I will be leaving it behind, apart from the occasional visit, this beautiful Christian community will stay in my heart forever. Through St. John's I have learned much of what I know and developed much of my character, and I pray that after I am gone this church will continue to be the warmhearted, loving, welcoming fellowship of worshippers that I have come to know. Thank you, and may God bless you all. Amen.