

**Taste and See**

1 Peter 2:1-10

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140th Anniversary of St.

Andrew's Pioneer Church

The Psalmist writes, "Taste and see that the Lord is gracious." St. Peter picks up those words in our Epistle this morning as he writes, "As newborn babies, long for the spiritual milk, the real stuff, not watered down. That is what will make you grow up to salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

Peter goes on to write about Jesus, the cornerstone of a new and better temple, this time not a temple built of actual stone blocks, not a temple built with the ringing of hammers and chisels, but a temple built without hands—a temple made of people, plunged into the Holy Spirit in their baptism, a temple built on and centred around Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord and Saviour. With all that talk about cornerstones and buildings, it's no surprise that this is one of the Scripture lessons chosen for the occasion of a church's anniversary. We're thinking about buildings, but from the building, Scripture points us back to Jesus. In him we taste and see that the Lord is gracious.

I was thinking about that this week. Specifically, I was thinking of the ways in which this message of the graciousness of God in Jesus has been passed down from one generation to another. I was thinking about it in terms of the history of our own church building. Our congregation is only sixteen years old, but the spiritual heritage of those Presbyterian pioneers who built this church building almost a century and a half ago has been

passed on to us. There's more than a little irony in that inheritance. Here we are, Anglicans, worshipping in a building built by Presbyterians who were tired of worshipping with Anglicans. I suspect at least a few of them would be a bit miffed at the idea, but I think that on some reflection they would also be pleased to see us, fellow Christians, benefitting from their kingdom work and carrying it on in our way.

I found myself this week wondering what sort of people those Presbyterian pioneers were. Every article about the founding of Sandwick or St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church mentions that fateful meeting at the old log church built by Jules Willemar for his Anglican congregation. It was time to plan for the new church building and a meeting was called for Sunday afternoon. Matthew Piercy, who had recently arrived from New Brunswick, stood up and announced that he'd never conducted business on the Sabbath and did not intend to start. He left and his fellow Presbyterians followed. He and Samuel Crawford donated adjoining acres here on the hill and before too long, this church was being built under the supervision of George Grieve. What kind of people were they? When I hear that story I can't help but think of some of the cantankerous Presbyterians who have visited the Anglican churches where I have pastored. One man stayed for the whole service, but angrily informed me that we were wrong to be singing anything but psalms. In his own way, he declared, "I've never sung anything but psalms on the Sabbath and I'm not about to start doing otherwise now!" Needless to say, if Anglicans and Puritans—the closest of siblings in doctrinal terms—had been able to get along better, this four-hundred-year-old schism between us never would have happened. But while we may not always address each other as charitably as we should, being fellow Christians, our strong feelings are borne out of a desire to please God in our worship and be to faithful

followers of his Word. Our occasional cantankerousness points on the one hand to our love for God and our sincere desire to be faithful to him and on the other to our continuing need of God's transforming grace.

So what sort of people were the Piercys, the Crawfords, the Grieves, the Berkeleys and the McPhees, the Duncans and the Salmonds, the Parkins and the Turnbells, the Robbs and the McQuillans and all those others people who were instrumental in shaping the life of this church. I walk back and forth through the cemetery almost every day, but it's been a long time since I stopped and looked. On Thursday, on my way home for lunch, I walked up the hill, to where Matthew Piercy's and Samuel Crawford's graves stand on opposite sides of the road, and then I walked amongst the monuments and the headstones. Some just have names and dates on them. Many of the graves are completely unmarked. But on many of the graves of those old church-members are engraved passages of Scripture, Christian virtues, the fruit of the Spirit, and on many of them expressions of faith and hope in the crucified and risen Jesus—expression of faith and hope in the life of the age to come. They were people who believed very firmly that Jesus the Messiah came to redeem our race from sin and death and to one day make all things new. Their graves stand as witnesses to that faith.

What kind of people were they? Thursday afternoon I sat up in the attic and pondered the hand-made roof trusses that run the length of the church. In 1876, Sandwick was a community of a couple of hundred farmers. There were no workmen to contract to build a church while the church-members went on with their usual work. The men of the church did it themselves. They hauled great logs from the beach to the sawmill and then hauled the lumber up the hill to the building site. They cut the lumber and built the framing and the trusses themselves. They cut cedar shakes for

the roof, at home in the evenings, after the day's work was done. They ground clamshells and made plaster themselves. They were people who sacrificed to build a place in which they could worship the risen Lord Jesus.

What kind of people were they? I was reading this week of Thomas Menzies. He was the longest serving of St. Andrew's pastors—serving from 1900 to 1920. For their first twenty-five years, the people of St. Andrew's held out from joining the newly formed Presbyterian Church of Canada and were part of the old Church of Scotland. Thomas Menzies persuaded them to finally join Presbyterian Church of Canada. During his time here, as the population grew, he established new congregations in Comox and Courtenay and served all three churches himself. He conducted the service in morning in Comox, here in the afternoon, and in the evenings at St. George's in Courtenay. He was a devoted shepherd and seems to have been everywhere he was needed. I was also reading about Jules Willmar, the first Anglican priest in the Comox Valley. He came as a missionary to the Indians and was here for forty-two years. He pastored St. Andrew's Anglican Church, but to that were eventually added congregations in Comox, Cumberland, and Denman Island. Every two weeks he would paddle his canoe over to Denman and back. He would regularly paddle that same canoe all the way to Nanaimo and then catch a steamer back home. These were shepherds devoted to God's flock.

What kind of people were these? These were people who had tasted that the Lord is gracious and in return for his graciousness, they sacrificed their all. They had experienced what St. Peter describes when he writes about new-borns longing for spiritual milk. I expect most of the members of this church back then had been born into Christian families. They had been

baptised as infants. They never knew a time when they weren't members of God's covenant family. That's how it should be for the children of believers. And as they grew, they were nourished and sustained and grew to maturity on spiritual milk. A few verses earlier, in Chapter 1, Peter tells us what that spiritual milk is. He compares it there to seed scattered by a farmer—an image those pioneers certainly understood well. But Peter says that the milk, the seed "is the word that was announced to you." That word changes hearts and minds and as it does that it changes lives. Peter talks about such people, as they learn the way of Jesus and as they grow in the life of the Spirit, putting away deceitful, hateful malice and all ill-speaking. In the previous chapter he writes about the way of eager, pure, sincere love. But we see the life of Jesus in these people too in their commitment and their sacrifice. The hand planed spruce under your feet, the roof trusses in the attic over your head, the plaster ground from clamshells and the cedar shakes cut by hand in the evenings when the chores were done—they all speak of a devotion to Jesus and a devotion to his bride, his body, his Church nourished by that spiritual milk, nourished by that word.

They built a building. They hired pastors. And they came to hear and to be fed on spiritual milk and they grew strong. They baptised their children and raised them on more of that same spiritual milk, and they grew strong, too. Being heirs of the Puritans, I have no doubt that here they were reminded of the sinfulness of sin. I have no doubt that they were reminded of their need for a Saviour. Here they read the Scriptures and rehearsed the story of Abraham and of Moses and of David, the story of Elijah and Isaiah and Ezekiel. And here they read the story of Jesus, God incarnate, who died for the sins of his people and rose from the grave, Lord of all, to make all things new. And here they learned in

those Scriptures that God, in his goodness and faithfulness, keeps his promises. Here they learned that in Jesus, they were the inheritors of those promises—to Abraham, to Moses, to David, to the Prophets—fulfilled in the Lord Jesus and brought to life in them and in their children—the Piercy's and the Crawfords, the Grieves and Duncan, the McPhees and the Berkeleys, and all the others who gathered here. They were the people in whom Jesus had placed his Spirit, fulfilling the Lord's promise to replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. And here, because they knew that our God is a god who does what he says he will do, because they learned that he is a god who is good and faithful, they learned of their hope in Jesus and the life of the age to come—a hope that inspired the spruce under your feet and the rafters over your heads and the words carved into the headstones in the grass outside the windows.

It was all thanks to that life giving word—the message that was announced by the apostles to the early church and the message that has been announced from one generation to another for two thousand years since: the message about Jesus the Messiah, through whose sacrificial death and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the people of this world might be ransomed from their bondage to sin and death and be given a new life and a new purpose, and restored to the vocation for which we were created—to live and to serve in the presence of our life-giving God.

Brothers and Sisters, that message, that word, that announcement *does* something! The first people to follow Jesus discovered this on Pentecost. Peter, as he wrote his epistles, knew it first-hand. Thousands were gathered in Jerusalem for that great festival, fifty days after Passover—and, that year, fifty days after Jesus had risen from the grave—and Peter stood before them and rehearsed the story—

the story of Abraham and Moses and David and the Prophets, the story of the promises of God to fix what is wrong with the world and to deliver his people from their bondage to sin—and then Peter explained how it had all be fulfilled in Jesus and in his death and resurrection. He proclaimed that *word*. And that *word* brought life. “What should we do about this?” they begged of Peter. And Peter told them, “Repent—turn aside from everything—and be baptised into Jesus.” And thousands did just that. It wasn’t just that people listened and weighed what they heard and decided to give Jesus a try. This word, this announcement of good news, somehow it had—and it still has—power in and of itself, a power beyond just the words used to tell the story, and a power able to bring life in the midst of death. The word is a like a transfusion. People heard—and they still hear it—and they’re gripped by it, enlivened by it, given faith and hope by it, and driven out into the world to share that same life-giving word with their families, with their friends, with their neighbours, with their co-workers, with complete strangers. People hear that word and they build churches like this, dedicated to the proclamation of that word, dedicated to feeding the born again on spiritual milk and growing them to maturity.

But what about us, here a hundred and forty years later? As I was walking amongst the graves and reading about the people who built this church. As I was reading about their pastors and priests, I kept thinking about the way in which times have changed. I was thinking of the way in which those Anglicans and Presbyterians outgrew the little log church at the bottom of the hill as the population of Sandwick grew from one hundred to three hundred. I thought of those Presbyterian churches established by Thomas Menzies as Comox and Courtenay began to grow and the Anglican churches in Comox and Cumberland that Jules Willemar

planted. People—Christian people—moved here and they brought their faith with them and built churches in which to worship. Sheep came here and the churches fed those sheep. But today our community is far, far larger and the churches are barely holding on, some are dying, others have already died and disappeared. Some of them have simply failed to stay true to that live-giving proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. They’ve watered it down, they’ve tried to make it inoffensive, or they’ve substituted it with other messages—but none of those messages can bring life from death. They’ve changed the word and robbed it of its power. But more than anything, Brothers and Sisters, we struggle because we have largely failed to carry the life-giving news about Jesus out of the Church. We’re still waiting for the sheep to come to us, but times have changed. We live in a post-Christian age. Matthew Piercy moved here and built a church because of his love for Jesus. This week I talked to a woman who recently moved here who has no idea what a church even is. She didn’t know what a pastor is. She knew nothing more about Jesus than that he was a man who lived a long time ago and, apparently, said some stuff that still inspires some old-fashioned people today. She wasn’t hostile to me as a Christians—it’s just that the Church is as irrelevant to her as the Legion or the Rotary Club is to me. There are thousands of people like that in our community—in our workplaces, where we shop, where we socialise, where we go to school, even in our own families—people who are dying and need the life-giving message, the spiritual milk, the announcement about Jesus that has been entrusted to us. They won’t hear it if we don’t take it to them. Brothers and Sisters, those Presbyterian pioneers have given us an inheritance—a witness to the life-changing power of Jesus and a place to serve as a base of operations to mature ourselves and from which to carry the good news. As their faith

put the spruce flooring under your feet and the roof over your head, may that same faith now take us out into the world to share our faith and our hope, to declare to a dying world that this Jesus who was crucified, rose from the dead to give life and to make all things new.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in today’s collect we pray for your grace to go before us and to follow us that we might be committed to the good works and the ministry to which you have called us. We give you thanks for our brothers and sisters in Christ who have walked the way of faith before us and who have left us, in this building, a witness and a source of assurance that your grace goes on before us, preparing the way that we might follow in trusting confidence and in hope. Teach us to walk faithfully in your grace that we not squander our inheritance. You have gift and prepared us for ministry. Now, give us eyes to see the places you would have us work and proclaim your life-changing word and give us the boldness to do so, we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.