

Have you enjoyed staying at home and not being able to go shopping at the mall, out to eat or to church? I would think that about now many of us are getting cabin fever, somewhat tired of this isolation. However, when you think about it there might be some positive aspects to this situation. Of course, the most obvious one is the control of the spread of the coronavirus; hopefully we will continue to see a drop in the number of cases and deaths, especially in the western counties and the Navajo Nation. Another advantage is that many of us over the past two months have been able to catch up on our honey-do list; you know all those projects that we have been putting off for years.

Since we have not being able to go anywhere, many of us have occupied our time cleaning our houses and garages. As I noted in one of my emails a few weeks ago, Judy has cleaned every closet and cabinet in our house. She keeps throwing things away and I started getting worried that I might be next. We have thrown away so many old papers and documents that our recycle bin has been filled to the brim every Monday morning. Everybody seems to be doing spring cleaning. My son told me that he tried to take a load of trash the other day to city waste station and there were over thirty pickups lined up trying to get in. In addition, I have repainted all of our outdoor patio furniture and re-landscaped the front lawn with a cubic yard of rocks. I'm definitely ready to come back to church.

Also many people have taken advantage of this time to exercise and get in better shape. Because unfortunately, some of us have found it difficult to social distance ourselves from the refrigerator. So Judy and I try to walk every day. In addition to the exercise, it has allowed us to get to know our neighbors better since it seems like everybody is out walking in the neighborhood or the nearby park.

Now this got me to thinking; we have spent a lot of our time over the past two months cleaning and straightening up our homes, working on our yards and exercising, but have we spent any time on our spiritual well-being. Have we used this time to grow spiritually, closer to the Lord? Have you given your relationship with Jesus Christ any thought? Well, let's see what the Apostle Peter has to say about this in 1 Peter, the second chapter, verses 4-12. Listen to how the Peter calls us to be "living stones" for Jesus.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-12

Here Peter is describing the church as a spiritual house. Christianity is not a building, but a community of believers. The individual Christian finds their true place when they are part of this community. John Wesley said that there is no such thing as solitary religion. We are meant for fellowship and to support and build each other up in the faith; for it is on the faith of each believer that the Church is built.

Let me use a story about the Greek city Sparta as an illustration. The Spartan king boasted to a visiting monarch about how strong the walls of Sparta were. However, the visiting monarch looked around and didn't see any walls. So he asked the king: "Where are these walls that you are boasting about?" His host then pointed to his magnificent troops and said: "These are the walls of Sparta, every man is a brick."

The point is that a brick by itself is useless; it becomes useful only when it is incorporated into a building. So it is with each one of us. Peter does not call us bricks, but "living stones." The *Message* paraphrases verse 5 as follows: "Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God." The strength and ability of any church depends on the spiritual well-being of its members. Thus, each of us is a building block in this spiritual house called High Desert.

So how do we grow spiritually and become the "living stones" that God desires here at High Desert? What does our spiritual honey-do list look like? Well, as I have said many times before, a daily quiet time is essential to our spiritual growth and relationship with the Lord. We need to spend some time each and every day alone with the Lord in prayer and reading the Bible. Over the past few weeks, how many of us have spent time each day talking to family, friends and neighbors over the phone, internet or at a social distance, but have not spent one minute talking with God. Of course, these other conversations are important, but who do you think is going to get you through this current crisis? Remember that Jesus set the example for us; each day He went off to a solitary place to seek the fellowship and guidance of His Father.

Prayer is conversing with God. For the Christian, praying should be like breathing. Just as breathing is the response of physical life to the presence of air, so prayer should be the response of the spiritual life to the presence of God. I hope that during this time at home you have found a solitary place and followed the guidance of Psalm 46:10 – "Be still and know that I am God." Prayer is a means of dealing with life and its problems one day at a time. Remember the old saying: "Life by the yard is hard; life by the inch is a cinch."

In addition to spending time in prayer, are you spending time reading God's Word each day or is your Bible gathering dust on a shelf somewhere in your house? It's amazing how many of us can't start our day without checking the internet, television or our smart phone, but never take time to sit down with God's Word. Maybe we should all be like Vigil Howard, a professor I had for classes on the Old and New Testaments when I went to summer school at the Perkins Seminary in Dallas. Vigil came home one evening very upset. His wife asked him what was wrong. He said that someone had stolen his Bible with all his study notes. She said: "Well, I thought that you kept your Bible in your car." To which Vigil replied: "oh, they took the car

too!" His Bible was more important to Vigil than his car or any possession that he had. Is this true for us? Do you even know where your Bible is?

2 Timothy 2:15 states: "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." While it is not necessary to have a seminary degree, we all should have a working knowledge of the Bible. This requires constantly reading and studying it. Mahatma Gandhi said: "You Christians have in your keeping a document with enough dynamite in it to blow the whole civilization to bits, to turn society upside down, to bring peace to this war-torn world. But you read it as if it were just good literature, and nothing else."

It is not enough that we read the Bible merely as a record of what happened in the ancient past, as history. We need to listen to what God is trying to tell us. The Psalmist said it best in Psalm 119:105 – "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet." The Bible is our roadmap for life and is the best tool for getting through each day: those that are joyful and those that are disasters, like we are going through right now.

Let me use a personal experience to illustrate this. Several years ago we were having a meeting one night at the church in Grants when the light went out during a thunder storm. And it was dark, I mean dark. We were in the Fellowship Hall and I knew there were some matches and a candle in the pulpit. So I started feeling my way, slowly, very slowly, through the doors into the sanctuary and past the pews and up the steps to the pulpit. Now I was able to find the matches and candles because I was familiar with the church's layout. It's like that with God's Word. When you know it, when you know where to go for help, it will guide you safely through the dark periods of life, when the lights go out unexpectedly.

The Book of James tells us to "be doers of the Word, and not mere listeners only." We must not fool ourselves into thinking we know God's Word when we let it go in one ear and out the other, without putting it into action. No one becomes an accomplished doer of the Word overnight. It is a process of growth and development. Many Christians are like wooden fence posts instead of trees. If you plant a tree, it begins to grow and take root; however, if you set a post in the ground, it begins to decay immediately. God's Word only begins to take root and change our lives when we begin to put it in practice. For example, you can read all the books there are on hitting a baseball, but until you step in the batter's box, you will never know what it all means. Knowledge without application is useless.

The Apostle Paul wrote in the sixth chapter of Galatians: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore as we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people." The Book of James tells us that "faith without works is dead." Each one of us has been given gifts and talents by God to be used in His service.

In our text, Peter tells us that we have been chosen; chosen to obey and serve; chosen to be the hands, feet and voice of Jesus in this world; chosen to make a difference for the Lord.

I know that it is hard to be in service right now with all the restrictions on our activities. But there are still many things that we can be doing. One of the most obvious ones is to pray for others; take time each day to pray for your family, friends, neighbors, country and church. Remember as I said last week the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. I am thankful for all those who volunteer at the Food Pantry and assemble food packages to be distributed to school children under Feed New Mexico Kids. I know some of you are taking meals and groceries to those who are not able to get out. And I know there are some who are making masks for the residents of Navajo Nation and church members. The point is to look for opportunities to serve and do good during this crisis, and especially when we are able to get back out again.

As Christians, we are called to make a difference in this world, to leave things better than we found them. Think about it – if each person did their best for the Lord each and every day what a difference it would make in the world around us. Do you remember the story of the man who was walking along the beach one morning at daybreak? He noticed a young boy ahead of him picking up starfish and throwing them back into the ocean. Catching up to the boy, he asked him what he was doing. The boy told him that the stranded starfish would die if they were left on the beach until the morning sun hit them. “But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish,” countered the older man. “How can your efforts make a difference?” The young boy looked at the starfish in his hand and threw it to safety in the waves. “It makes a difference to this one,” he replied.

We can’t change the world overnight, but each one of us can do our part to make this a better place to live and to show God’s love through acts of love to those around us. So look around you and see where you can make a difference.

Finally, with all the doomsday forecasts about how deadly and contagious this virus is and with all those who have lost their lives to this disease, I think that some of us may have thought about how vulnerable we all are and how precious life is. This crisis reminds us that we never know when our time will be up. Have you thought about this over the past few weeks? There was a preacher who was visiting an elderly member of his church. He told her that at her age she needed to start thinking about the hereafter. To which she replied: “Pastor, every time I go into a room or open a closet, I wonder what am I here after.”

During these past few weeks has this crossed your mind? Has this experience shown you what is truly important in life? Have you given any thought to how you will be remembered? I have officiated at many funerals over my ministry, and I have heard a lot of euloges as family

members and friends remembered the life of the departed. These have ranged from a life that was lived to the best for the Lord and made a difference, to those where people were having a hard time finding something good to say. When I was in Grants, I once filled in for the Presbyterian minister at a funeral and the only things the family could say about the deceased was that he loved women. That's not much of a testimony for a life, is it?

But a more critical and solemn question is – are you ready to meet your maker? Now I know that is a doom and gloom question, and most people want to hear an uplifting and encouraging sermon. But in reality, it is one that we all need to seriously consider. Are we prepared? Have we given our life to God and confessed Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior? It is a personal decision, one that we must each make for ourselves. We are not going to get to heaven because our parents or spouse were Christians. As I said on Mother's Day, you cannot inherit salvation; you must choose it. If you haven't accepted Jesus into heart and given Him your life, now is as a good time as any. Don't wait until it is too late!

As this shutdown continues and you start looking for new projects to add to your honey-do list, consider your spiritual well-being. Use this time to grow closer to the Lord. Use the coming weeks to grow in your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Make the best of the time we have. May we become the "living stones" that God needs to build His kingdom here in Rio Rancho. It is my prayer that each one of us will grow spiritually and closer to the Lord each day. God be with you til we meet again. Amen