

EASTER 5 – Year A
May 14, 2017
Acts 7:55-60 / I Peter 2:2-10
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STONES. We can barely turn around in today's Scripture readings without running into a stone.

“Be my strong rock, a castle to keep my safe; my crag and my stronghold.”

“They began to stone him.”

“Come to him – a living stone”.

“A cornerstone, chosen and precious”.

“The stone that the builders rejected”.

“A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.”

“You also – like living stones . . .”

STONES. Stones are beautiful and awe-inspiring. And they are also at times annoying and a hindrance. Stones come as simply as a pebble in our shoe, a little thing that pinches and chafes and makes us stop, slow down long enough to try and rid ourselves of it. Stones can be irritations, interruptions, impediments, inconveniences, even signs of inhospitality. Stones present us with opportunities to gripe or grow. They can be life and character builders. The great artist Michelangelo supposedly was once asked how he crafted such beautiful sculptures. He said that he just chipped away at the stone until the image that was there all the time could be seen, just waiting to be revealed.

The stones we encounter in today's Scripture lessons are not monuments like those images of Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, and Roosevelt carved into the side of Mt. Rushmore, or like memorials to fallen soldiers.

The stones in today's readings are markers of who we are and to whom we belong. They remind us that following Jesus and his way of love is costly and we dare not go that way alone.

We tend to think of stones as inanimate objects. Hard chunks of the earth's sediment. Compressed eons' worth of evolution and change. Stones are chiseled into shape over time from volcanic eruptions and glaciers, eroded by wind and water. Stones make sturdy, strong, and formidable foundations and walls that protect. Stones can maim and kill. Stones block and stop movement in and out of places. Stones are ground down and hammered into tools, weapons, jewelry, altars, monuments, and way markers.

I learned recently that in Cappadocia in Turkey, there are immense ancient rock formations that have been carved, creating houses where people actually live - complete with windows, stairs, and rooms. The pictures of these stone and cave dwellings are amazing. And the wonder of these stone structures gets even more incredible! These rock formations have been carved out deep underground, as far down as eleven stories, and there exists what is actually an underground city. It might have been some early Christians who dug down there through those layers of rock to

escape persecution. Stones sheltered and saved the lives of early Christians, allowing the “Jesus movement” to eventually spread.

Unfortunately, Stephen was not one who was protected and saved by a stone edifice. He has just been ordained one of the first of seven deacons. The Jesus movement is growing and the apostles need help caring for the more vulnerable ones among them. After he is ordained, Stephen is so filled with the Holy Spirit he cannot settle for waiting tables, important as that work is, seeing to the care of widows and orphans. He is full of grace and power and has been healing, speaking truth, and showing the power of God in his words and actions. Some of his contemporaries take exception to what he is doing. And what unfolds for Stephen sounds an awful lot like what happened to Jesus. Stephen is arrested on false trumped up charges, and when given the opportunity to answer the charges, he goes to preaching. As one wiseacre once said, “The preacher went from preaching to meddling”. Among the synagogue of the Freedmen those who had argued with him had watched him and listened, and based on what they saw and heard, they decided he was no friend of God’s, because he showed no respect for what God had taught them through Moses. Stephen stood before the Council and the list of charges is read aloud: disrespect of holy places, disrespect of holy laws, disrespect of holy customs passed down from generation to generation.

That much of the story is the prelude to today’s reading from Acts – Stephen is doing the work of a Spirit filled deacon. Complaints are made and opponents conspire against him. He is arrested, charges brought forth, and then Stephen preaches a sermon. The sermon ends with this furious conclusion: *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors used to do” (Acts 7:51)*. He called them enemies of God. It doesn’t take them long to silence his accusations against them. They dragged Stephen out of the city and threw rocks at him until he died. Stephen, one of the first deacons in the church becomes the first martyr for the sake of the Jesus movement, as recorded in the Scriptures of the Greek New Testament. And as Jesus did from the cross, Stephen asks God to forgive those who took his life. Looking on as all this unfolds is the zealous Pharisee Saul, who eventually will be converted and live out his life as the missionary apostle Paul.

It has never been easy to be a follower of Jesus. Speaking truth to power can get you seriously injured or killed. At the end of the first century, the apostle Peter sits down to write a letter to the Gentile believers who are scattered throughout Asia Minor. It is time for Peter the pastor to deliver a pep-talk about persistence, perseverance, and the power of the living Christ. Elsewhere in this first letter, Peter refers to the believers as “aliens and exiles”, which is what they are, outsiders with a strange identity, trying to live faithfully as a minority in a pagan culture. Peter encourages them to hold on in the midst of all the political challenges, slavery, abuse, questions and name-calling, suffering and pain. He reminds them that Jesus faced opposition and suffered pain and humiliation, too.

Even through outright persecution, Peter says they need not be shaken. Jesus, the rejected and broken stone, a stumbling block to the world as it was (and is), is the cornerstone, the foundation on which their lives are now grounded. Calling on Christ's risen and living presence is how they can stand firm.

"Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God." Peter is not describing a simple, follow the printed instructions, do-it-yourself house-building project. "Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" is far different from saying, "Build a spiritual house".

If we were in charge of building a spiritual house we would plan a capital campaign, bring in architects to look at possibilities for expansion. It would mean not only repainting but renovating the worship space. Enlarging all the entrances and access ways to make them open automatically at the push of a button, totally handicap accessible. Our spiritual house would need upgraded sound systems for church and parish hall. A bigger kitchen with twice the storage capacity. A wing dedicated to children with inviting open space for them to play and explore. And we would probably even consider adding another separate wing to accommodate overnight sleeping quarters, showers, and a laundry.

This building that Peter writes about is not something *we do* – ***"let yourselves be built"***. This is something Jesus Christ is doing and is not dependent on what the church building looks like.

When, as living stones, connected through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, *we let ourselves be built into a spiritual house* marked by the presence of Christ, the results to the outside world may not be very impressive. How is it that we measure faithfulness, anyway? Important as bricks and mortar are, that is not a very accurate measure of faithfulness. Among those *being built into a spiritual house*, poor and wealthy sit down together in the same pew. Do you know of many places where that happens? No one member is better or more important than any other. Those with PhD's and GED's sing and pray together, share responsibility for stewardship of the congregation's resources. Hearty and hail, feeble and frail stand side by side and kneel at the altar, or receive the bread of heaven and cup of salvation with us from their seats and in their homes when the lay Eucharistic visitors take the Eucharist to them. Those with significant gifts of healing and compassion reach out a hand to the broken and sad, addicted and convicted to offer Jesus' healing touch. *All of us are those living stones* – called to let ourselves be built by God into a spiritual house – a community where Christ's Spirit is alive, can be seen, heard, touched and tasted. God in Christ has done this.

This is who you are, writes Peter, to those struggling, scattered followers of the Jesus movement. You can hear it ringing out antiphonally, back and forth, one side of the gathered faithful congregation saying to the other as they read the words from Peter's letter aloud again:

- ***“Once you were not a people”***
- and the other side responds – ***“but now you are God’s people.”***
- ***“Once you had not received mercy –***
- ***but now you have received mercy”.***

We are God’s merciful people. A rock-solid foundation built on Christ the cornerstone gives us an identity that will not shrivel up at the first sign of trouble. The genius of God’s actions on Easter Sunday is that there is death to counter every day, not just at Easter. There are oppressive structures to stand up to, confront, and overturn every day, not just at Easter. There is life to be celebrated every day, not just at Easter. No stereotypes can define us because we have been claimed by God. No ridicule can undo us, because we have been named by God. No shallow expression of faith can represent us. We are empowered to live out the promise of new life in the midst of a world that is not yet what God wants it to be. The good news is that we have not been left on our own to haul and push and heave the heavy boulders of life. God has given us each other, and continues to make us - adjoining living stones – into a spiritual house, built into something beautiful for God and healing for the world.

The invitation today is for you to take the stone you have chosen and hold in your hand. Sit with it several times this week and pray for one specific area of ministry at Trinity: the English as a Second Language program, the Thursday morning free breakfast, congregational care, music and worship, lay Eucharistic visitors, children and families, hospitality and welcome to all individuals and community groups who are our neighbors, those passionate and active in caring for and protecting our earth. As you hold that stone and pray for others, also pray the psalmist’s words for yourself. Pray for the confidence to trust that God *is* your “strong rock, a castle to keep you safe, your crag and your stronghold.” Christ the cornerstone undergirds, supports, and sustains us. No earthly stone could hold him captive in life or death. No boulders, barriers, or mountain of rock is able to stop his coming to us with the promise and power of new life now. This friends, is enough to anchor and strengthen us for all the days ahead. Alleluia, alleluia. Amen.