

May 14, 2017
1 Peter 2:2-5,7; Acts 7:55-60
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“Man Alive!”

In today's sermon, I'm putting together two very different scriptures even though they have a common theme. They are from Acts and 1 Peter, both part of the lectionary readings for this fifth Sunday after Easter. The commonality is a reference to stones. What do the stoning of Stephen and Peter's reference to living stones have in common? My challenge is to meld the two passages into one theme.

In the first scripture, we find Stephen being pelted by stones for preaching about Jesus. Stephen was one of seven men who were chosen to serve as deacons to care for the widows among them. Acts 2 says Stephen was “full of grace and power” and did many signs and wonders. He was an eloquent speaker, but the wisdom and boldness of Stephen's sermons caused some opposition. “We've heard him say blasphemous words against Moses and God,” they accused. When Stephen was arrested, the high priest asked him, “Is this so?” Stephen responded with a beautiful Hebrew history lesson from Abraham and Joseph to Moses, David and Solomon, and noted the frequent disobedience of their ancestors. Like Peter, his sermons got a little accusatory. “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that *received* the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not *kept* it” (Acts 7:51-53). His accusation incited a riot, and Stephen was stoned to death. His testimony in death resembled Jesus' words on the cross. The heavens opened up and Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Like Jesus, he forgave those who stoned him, and as he breathed his last, he committed himself into the hands of God.

If you remember last week, the youth read from Acts 2 that after Pentecost more than 3000 people were added to the church. In Acts 4, the boldness of Peter and John amazed everyone, because they knew these men to be uneducated and ordinary folks. They were arrested for their boldness, and upon their release, the apostles prayed to be even more bold! The story of Jesus' resurrection made the disciples alive and on fire for Jesus Christ! Of these same apostles people would nervously complain, "They are turning the world upside down!" (Act 17:6) In other words, the disciples became world-changers.

Turning now to 1 Peter 2, I like *The Message* translation. Think of it as a three-step process to becoming alive. Peter says:

- Drink deep of God's pure kindness.
- Grow mature and whole in God.
- Give yourselves as living stones to be built into God's spiritual house.

There is a story about the Abbey Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Bath, England, known commonly as Bath Abbey . It was built on the remains of a massive Norman cathedral and founded as a monastery in the seventh century. Bath Abbey has been a house of worship for centuries. The very structural stability of the abbey, however, was in jeopardy, not because of its age, but because over 6000 people have been buried just below the stone flooring of the church.¹ The extent of the problem was realized only recently when workers were digging to find the foundation walls of the Norman cathedral, hoping those would provide a solid ground layer on which to lay new floors. They found instead that the old foundation was gone and there were huge voids under the entire structure. Over time the buried bodies were reduced to bones and the graves settled, leaving large open spaces beneath the floor. An extensive project to stabilize the edifice had to be done.²

The church of Christ is not built on dead bones but on living stones with Jesus as the anchor. "God wants us to be part of an edifice

¹ *The Stones and Bones of Bath Abbey*, sermon, www.homileticsonline.com

² Silverstein website, www.samsilverstein.com, June 30, 2009.

where people can meet God.”³ One preacher said, “Stephen became a world-changer . . . because he set his sail according to the Christ Compass . . . We don’t have to die to change the world. We simply have to live in a particular way and move in a distinctive direction”⁴ with Christ as our compass.

What does it mean to be a church built of living stones with Christ as the Cornerstone? Bruce Bishop says, “It means that instead of skipping stones across the surface of the water, we take the time to let them sink. Most church business meetings are so intent upon achieving the decision, or on presenting or avoiding a personal agenda, that our collective spirit skips across the surface of God’s Spirit, only occasionally stirring the waters and getting wet. But when a group decides that they will be content only with the leading of the Spirit, it requires them to sink below the surface, to settle for a time on the sandy bottom and to be completely encompassed in the presence of the living Christ. The church is the body of Christ, and Jesus Christ didn’t ‘do business.’ He moved and acted out of his times of prayer.”⁵

Think of a mosaic as a metaphor for the church. Every movement is composed of a diverse people participating together for a common purpose. Alice Paul comments, “I always feel a movement is like a mosaic. Each of us puts in one little stone, and then you get a great mosaic at the end.”

Will we as a church be satisfied skipping stones or will we dive deep and become living stones? Will we be a diverse church and become a beautiful mosaic for the world to see? Will we become world conformers who follow the crowd or world changers, following the compass of Christ?

For Stephen it was a no brainer. He charted his course with Jesus Christ as his compass. If Jesus could stand firm to his calling and forgive those who persecuted him, Stephen would follow his example.

³ *The Stones and Bones of Bath Abbey.*

⁴ *World Changers*, sermon, www.homileticsonline.com

⁵ Bruce Bishop, “Group discernment,” Quaker Life, April 2000, www.fum.org/QL/issues/0004/bishop.htm.

You see, even before Stephen's death, he had become a living stone in faith and life, securely fitted into the chief Cornerstone.

Stephen's story notes one person sitting on the sidelines. It was Saul, not yet known as Paul. Chris Seiple says, "Saul was an extremely zealous and advanced student of religious law. He possessed legalistic righteousness." This state-sponsored terrorist oversaw murder of Christians, destroyed their places of worship, hunted down, imprisoned and forced renunciations. After Christ met him on the road to Damascus, he became "the most successful evangelist in the history of the world. Paul knew he was forgiven, but he never forgot the terrorist he was before his transforming encounter with Christ."⁶

Would it surprise you to know that persecution of Christians is higher in the last quarter century than at any other time in history, and more geographically dispersed than in most time periods studied? According to *Christianity Today*, approximately 215 million Christians experience high, very high, or extreme persecution.⁷ In 25 years of "chronicling and ranking" the political and societal restrictions experienced by Christians worldwide, 2016 was the worst year yet. North Korea remains the most dangerous place to be a Christian. Pakistan rose to No. 4 on the list, even exceeding northern Nigeria.

Getting back to the stone metaphor, Joshua 4:19-24 tells another story. After wandering forty years in the wilderness, the people of God were set to enter the land of Canaan. Normally the Jordan was a small river that could be easily forded. However, during spring the melting snows in the mountains turned the river into a torrent. It spread out over the flood plain and could be as much as a mile wide. But Joshua assured the people that God was about to do something wonderful so that they might know that He was their God and that He was with them!

⁶ Chris Seiple, "Pride of patience," in The PRISM Epistle, the newsletter of Evangelicals for Social Action, October 19, 2005.

⁷ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2017/january/top-50-countries-christian-persecution-world-watch-list.html>, collected by Open Door.

As the priests carried the ark of the covenant into the flooded river, the waters stopped flowing. After they had all crossed on dry land, the river began to flow again. As a memorial to this event, the people took stones from the river and placed them upright on the shore, like altars. In later generations, when people saw the stones and asked what they were for, the story of God's great act for the people was recounted. These stones were a way to recall who God is, who they as a people belong to, and who they should be as God's people.

There are stones standing that others have left for us--stones from their life experiences where have seen their own lives empowered by a really true God! When we ask, "What do these stones mean?" they testify "I met God here. I know that the hand of the LORD is powerful. And I want you to know so that you might always reverence the LORD your God."⁸

Living stones of faith, like Stephen. Living stones that say, "I met God here." Living stones built and securely fitted together with Christ the cornerstone. People of God alive! World-changers. May it be true of us as well.

"The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone of a whole new world."

⁸ Dennis Bratcher, "Living stones," <http://www.criovoice.org/S-stones.html>.