

“Living Stones: Love Embodied”

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Psalm 31:1-16 Acts 7:55-60 1 Peter 2:2-10 John 14:1-14

On this Mother’s Day Sunday, three of the four readings we just shared speak of stones. The fourth reading from John’s gospel doesn’t mention stones but says “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me,” which is something I can hear not only Jesus say but words a caring mother might say to her kids when life feels as hard as a stone. For over a week, I’ve been thinking there’s got to be a way to weave something meaningful together with today’s readings. Well, I’m still hoping there is.

I’ll begin with something my Mom taught both in word and deed, a belief that found its way into the unwritten rules enforced our household. Mom taught us two boys (and my Dad as well) that words carry the power to hurt someone, like sticks and stones can potentially break bones. This, of course, is a variation on the old saying “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” which I suspect my Mom also believed; children need to develop a secure sense of self when faced with general adversity and specific acts of hurtful name-calling. But this didn’t go far enough. Mom believed that it was just as important to teach us that using hurtful words (for the purpose of hurting) is inappropriate. This fell into the category of Un-Christian. Not Christ-like. Un-loving. Making fun of people was one of the “deadly sins” where I lived, and it was not tolerated; we couldn’t even tease or taunt our dog.

The first point I’ll try to make flows from the first reading, Acts 7:55-60. Let’s wean off throwing stones. Literal stones hurt, and words meant to hurt leave deep wounds. Ask Stephen, who is featured in this reading. Now, I know it is dangerous for one preacher to criticize another preacher, so I’ll tread lightly here, but it is important to note that it is possible to be the victim of one kind of hurt and the perpetrator of the other kind of hurt. In the verses just before today’s reading, there may be a clue as to why a council meeting was transformed into a mob. After speaking for some 51 verses (7:2-53), referencing specific Jewish events that span Genesis 12 through chapter 50, Stephen reportedly ends his sermon by saying: “You stiff-necked, stubborn people! You are like those who have had no part in God’s covenant! You continuously set yourself against the Holy Spirit, just like your ancestors did. You harass your own prophets... and murder the Righteous One they predicted would come. Sure, you received the Law, but you don’t keep it!” And more or less, that’s where he left it. Pretty rocky ending, don’t you think?

Why focus on a difficult conclusion to a first century sermon? Well, maybe simply to ask: Is there a more effective way to speak of God, who is mysteriously revealed in Jesus, the son of Mary? I think there is. From what I’ve learned, there are two ways to encourage dialogue where there is diversity and difference. One way is to reduce everything (religion, politics, sexuality—you name it) to a single common denominator. The goal is not to offend so that nobody gets stoned. But there is another way. We can work carefully at highlighting (not hiding) what makes us unique and different. This approach invites everybody to be themselves and on their best behavior. One writer put it this way: “Rather than agreeing not to risk being offensive, we

agree not to be so easily offended.” I’m attracted to this second approach. It seems to me that it is more “Christian,” that is, more in keeping with how Jesus embodied “the way, truth and life” among us. But it is the more difficult way, I think. I worry that we may have become too prickly, too easily offended to be this Christian. What do you think? You’re likely pondering this questions: had Stephen soften his words and dialed back the accusations, would he still have been stoned? There’s no way of knowing. But we know this much, I think. Without love, words can be dangerous; it is time to wean off throwing around hurtful ones. If for no other reason, we’ll have fewer messes to clean up and bodies to bury.

Here’s the second point. Without love, a cornerstone will never become an adequate foundation. From *Acts* we turn to *1 Peter*, a move from throwing stones to the Cornerstone. Last week’s metaphor, you may remember, was God in Christ revealed as the Good Shepherd. This week’s metaphor is God in Christ revealed as “Generative Cornerstone.” And, yes, you guessed it! It is Simon, whom Jesus renames Cephas, which is Aramaic for “rock,” *Petros* in Greek, Peter in English, who tells the early Christians that, although rejected by many a mortal, Christ was chosen from the beginning of time to be the cornerstone to what God wanted to build all along. Cornerstone? Yes, but from what we know of the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ it is not the enormity or weight of the cornerstone that makes for us and our world a sure foundation, but the magnetism of its love! This Cornerstone attracts not repels. This Cornerstone invites and never dismisses. It is a strange metaphor to be sure, but let’s allow Peter, the rock, to make it: Christ is a cornerstone with generative power that produces living stones! From this Cornerstone flows the power to help us become living stones ourselves, used in the building of a spiritual house, in which all—not just the clergy—serve as a holy priesthood, whose holy work and high hopes become gifts acceptable to God who is the architect of the whole thing. To become a “living stone” from this Cornerstone is like being an orphan, writes Peter, and one day being taken in by a family so large that the largest possible dwelling place is needed. It is like receiving mercy for the first time ever, writes Peter. But, without love, none of this is not possible. Only living stones, capable of loving others, can be used to build what is needed.

And finally we get to the reading from John. Jesus says: “Do not let your hearts remain troubled. I know of a house with many, many rooms, because the owner has big dreams for a very large and diverse family.” An adequate house for the human family to inhabit requires the embodiment of Love. This is what Jesus means, I think, when he says: “I am the way, truth and even life, itself.” Did you noticed that Jesus did not say “Christianity is the way,” nor did he say “The Trinity or some theory of atonement is the truth?” And Jesus didn’t say that “The latest health and prosperity fad is the Life!” To say “I am” is to suggest that there is no “way” that isn’t embodied. There will be no “truth” unless it is fleshed out in blood and bone, muscle and brain. There is no “life,” not one worth living, without love.

On this 5th Sunday of Easter, a Mother’s Day Sunday, no less, we are reminded that the dwelling God is building is not a house of cards but one made of love. Its Cornerstone is Love incarnate, its foundation constructed of living stones, mere mortals made from love and capable of loving. Love is way, Love is truth, and Love is life, and Jesus emphatically tells Thomas/Philip that they already know this, apparently because they have lived in Love’s presence! What could possibly go wrong?