

Sermon for the 5th Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020

Acts 7:55-60

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner",

And "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him,

"Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

There is a recurring mention of rocks and stones and cornerstones in our readings today. You may remember from geology class that there are three classifications of rocks. Igneous rocks are created from volcanic lava that has cooled and solidified. Sedimentary rocks are formed by the accumulation of earlier rocks, moved and formed under the influence of gravity, water, and pressure. Metamorphic rocks are formed by subjecting existing rocks to extreme temperature and pressure.

There's no exam coming after the sermon, but keep in mind that in general, rocks are formed under severe conditions – fire and pressure, glaciers and water erosion. It is for this reason that rocks are hard and strong, and yet they are over and over transformed by the same elements that created them. From boulders to pebbles, rocks and stones are everywhere. You can collect them, paint them, landscape with them; and you can throw them.

Throwing stones - why do we do that? We start as children, using real stones or hurtful words; we exclude, we blame, we shame. As we grow up, we pick up larger, harder rocks like passive aggressive behaviors, racism, and weapons of mass destruction.

We have all thrown a stone or two, and we all know the rhyme from our childhood - Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Only it's not true, is it? Because sometimes words do hurt, even more than stones. And the fire and pressure of those words we hear as children sometimes make our adult hearts like stone. And wasn't it Jesus who said, "let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone?" Jesus knows we are all fully capable of some stone throwing behavior. Oh, it may have been awhile since we bent down, picked up a stone, and threw it at someone else, but what about the metaphorical stones? What might they be and how do we throw them?

Perhaps they are the hurtful words we hurl, even at our loved ones, in our anger and frustration. Maybe they are words of criticism, condemnation or judgment. Maybe our favorites are the stones of sarcasm or the weighty rocks of holding grudges. Sometimes they are in the form of exchanging heated words with those with whom we do not agree. Just look at social media. It has become a stoning pit.

Lately there seems to be a rockslide of hate and vitriol unlike anything we have experienced before. According to social scientist Arthur Brooks, we don't have an anger or hate problem in society, as much as we have a contempt problem, which is far worse. Contempt is defined as a mix of the primary emotions of disgust and anger. The Latin word *contemptus* means "scorn." It's the feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn.

Contempt is a very dangerous thing. Its danger lies in contempt's peculiar ability to dehumanize its target. Widespread public contempt has the potential to undermine the moral basis of all human relationships and, indeed, of human community itself.

When Arthur Brooks asked the Dalai Lama, "What do I do when I feel contempt?" The Dalai Lama said, "Show warm-heartedness." When we encounter contempt we can choose to react to it with warm-heartedness.

And this brings us to the stoning of Stephen. As a member of the early Christian community, Stephen was assigned to serve food to those who were hungry and to tend to the widows. But the Holy Spirit had in mind that Stephen's gift of preaching would also be of great service! We only hear the ending of the story in today's reading, so it's helpful to know that Stephen had preached what we might call a fire and brimstone sermon to the council that day. He recounted the history of the people of Israel, speaking truth to them about their failure to hear God's purposes as spoken through the prophets. He reminded them that long ago God told Moses that they were a stiff-necked people, which enraged the council and caused them to grind their teeth! Then filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, he saw the heavens open! When he described what he saw, the contempt of the council could no longer be contained and they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death.

It's a painful story, yet it remains true through the ages. Those who live in contempt destroy relationships and even lives. The heat, pressures, and raging waters of life can harden our hearts to stone, and yet, our hearts can be transformed by the cornerstone of our faith. Those who follow Jesus bear witness to him by imitating his kind-heartedness, his peaceful self-sacrifice. In his last words, Stephen commends his spirit to Jesus, just as Jesus commended his to the Father. As Stephen prays for his enemies and forgives his attackers praying, "Lord, do not hold this against them," we remember the words Jesus spoke from the cross, "Father, forgive them."

There are always going to be stones available for throwing, and people who are angry enough to throw them. Human anger stokes the fire of hatred and applies the pressure of judgment, it ices into glaciers of contempt and causes waves of erosion that threaten to sweep away society. But God is stronger than anything that can wound us. God heals our hurt and our anger, transforming our stony hearts into warm-heartedness, and in turn working through us to transform others with the power of love and forgiveness.

Stephen shows that the faithful response to contempt is warm-heartedness and forgiveness. One need not be divine to do what Stephen did. Jesus tells us: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

The next time you see a stone, pick it up. Feel the weight of it in your hand. Let it remind you of a time you felt contempt and chose to throw a stone rather than forgive. Then remember Stephen, who forgave those who were stoning him. Remember that he could not do that without first gazing at the glory of God. As you turn the stone over in your hand, let it remind you that we are all living stones, chosen and precious in God's sight, that Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith and our strong foundation. Let it remind you that God is the rock of our salvation. Amen.

Arthur C. Brooks <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/08/opinion/the-thrill-of-political-hating.html>

Karen Stohr https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/opinion/our-new-age-of-contempt.html?_r=0