

Living Stones

Long ago in a faraway place, there was a little girl who lived with her father and mother and brother in a house of whitewashed brick. A house on a hill. A house embraced by deep woods. In those woods, wildflowers bloomed and thrushes sang. The girl climbed trees and ran and played. And she learned how to be part of a family.

In time, the girl grew up and went away to school. Then one day, her father sold the house to new owners.

Many years passed. And the woman who had been that girl returned to the faraway place and went to look at the house on the hill. The land had increased greatly in value. She'd heard that the old house was going to be torn down and a new megamansion built in its place on the hill. Because she couldn't bear to see that, she knew that she would never come back. So she chose one small stone from the property. And she took it with her. It sits on her desk today. And sometimes she picks up that stone and holds it in her hand and thinks of a home that still lives in the memory of the heart.

Stones serve as memorials of meaningful places and passages. For forty years, the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. When at last they were able to enter the land that God had promised, twelve stones—one for each tribe—were taken from the Jordan River bed at the exact spot where Israel had crossed over into the land of promise. And at that spot, those stones were set up as a monument. So that the place would never be forgotten.

All through the biblical narrative, we read about stones and their significance. But stones aren't always used for remembrance and blessing. Stones can hurt. Can wound. Can kill. What will we do with the stones that are available to *us*? Jesus invites whoever among us is without sin to be the first to hurl a stone at another.

A few minutes ago we heard, in the Acts of the Apostles, the historical account of the stoning of Stephen. The first Christian martyr. The first follower of Jesus to die as a witness to his faith. It's not easy to read or to hear. Such an execution would end only when nothing could be seen but a pile of stones, with no movement underneath.

Stones serve evil purposes as well as good. The adversary uses stones to tempt Jesus. Tempts Jesus, famished in the desert, to take stones and transform them into bread.

Because stones aren't what anyone would consider edible.

I share with you a story.

Once upon a time, three soldiers, hungry and weary of battle, came upon a small village. The villagers, suffering a meager harvest and the many years of war, quickly hid what little they had to eat and met the three at the village square, wringing their hands and bemoaning the lack of food.

The soldiers spoke quietly among themselves and the first soldier then turned to the village elders. "Your tired fields have left you nothing to share, so we will share what little we have: the secret of how to make soup from stones."

Naturally the villagers were intrigued, and soon, water was heating in the town's largest kettle, as the soldiers dropped in three smooth stones. "Now this will be a fine soup," said the second soldier, "but a pinch of salt and some parsley would make it wonderful!" Up jumped a villager, crying "What luck! I've just remembered where some's been left!" And off she ran, returning with an apronful of parsley and a potato. As the kettle

boiled on, the memory of the village improved. Soon, barley, carrots, beef, and cream had found their way into the great pot, and a cask of wine was rolled into the square as all sat down to enjoy the meal.

They ate and danced and sang well into the night, refreshed by the feast and their new-found friends. In the morning the three soldiers awoke to find the entire village standing before them. At their feet lay a satchel of the village's best bread and cheese. "You have given us the greatest of gifts: the secret of how to make soup from stones," said an elder, "and we shall never forget." The third soldier turned to the crowd, and said: "There is no secret, but this is certain: it is only by sharing that we may make a feast." And the soldiers wandered off down the road.

From the parable of stone soup, we understand how those stones bring together good things for all. A tasty meal that's greater than the sum of its parts. In the same way, Jesus is greater than all his gifts. Yet he is the source of every good gift. The milk of kindness. The grain of faith. The salt of graciousness. The meat of truth. The vegetables of fellowship.

The seasoning of love. And the wine of forgiveness. All these are brought together in Christ. A living stone.

According to today's Scripture reading, Christ *is* a living stone. Not an inert, immobile, lifeless stone. But, in this Eastertide, throughout the Christian year, and in all times and all places: *risen!* And *alive!* A living stone.

And not just *any* stone. Though rejected by humans, he is the One chosen by God. A priceless stone set in honor and glory. In the prophet's poetry, a precious cornerstone.

Have you ever attended and witnessed the laying of the cornerstone of a building? It's usually a ceremonial occasion at which speeches are made. The stone itself bears an inscription. So essential, so foundational is the cornerstone that if it's not properly placed, the integrity of the whole building is compromised. It won't stand straight. It may crumble. The entire building rests on the cornerstone. It's the indispensable, fundamental basis of everything built upon it.

Just as Jesus Christ is the indispensable, fundamental ground of our hope. Jesus Christ is the One on whom everything else rests. Jesus Christ is the One on whom all else depends.

Jesus Christ is the One of inestimable value. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. Jesus Christ is the living stone.

Stone is unlike any other substance. When we say that something is carved in stone—think of the Ten Commandments—what we mean is that it's not going to be gone tomorrow. It's not going to disappear. It's not going to be easily eradicated or altered. In cemeteries, we find graves marked by stones bearing names, dates, and epitaphs. We know those stones are going to be there for a long time.

The characteristics of stone are very like the attributes of the One who fashioned it—the One who is the psalmist's Rock, and ours, too. Attributes like permanence. Unchanging-ness. Strength. Remember Jesus' teaching about the house that was built on rock? *The rains fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall.* It was built on rock.

Speaking of rock. This Sunday's epistle bears the name of a disciple we first get introduced to as Simon. But Jesus gives Simon a new name: Rocky. That's what the name *Peter* means. Rock. Peter, too, was a living stone Christ used in building his church. In building his community of followers.

In our parable of stone soup, stones bring those soldiers and villagers together and make them community. Christ is the cornerstone, the living stone, who brings *us* together and gathers *us* into community.

In radical contrast to the culture around us, a culture that's focused and centered on the individual. Once we were solitary individuals going our own way. Doing our own thing. Once we were no people.

But Simon Peter affirms that when we come to Christ, we *become* a people. When we come to Christ, we become community. When we come to Christ, we become—like him—living stones!

Stones that build communities of faith. Churches are built with stones. Living stones. You and I are the church. But we are not the builders! The building of the church is the work of the One to whom you and I are to present ourselves as living stones. Your task and mine is to give ourselves over to being useful and ready for the work of the Builder, who calls us to let ourselves be built into a spiritual house. Who calls us into the household of all who have responded to God's measureless grace. Who calls us into the company of the baptized.

In Peter's first letter, he reflects on baptism. His words are for you, for you have been washed in the waters of baptism. When you are washed in the waters of baptism, you are incorporated and welcomed into the ministry of all baptized Christians. When you are washed in the waters of baptism, you become a member of the priesthood of all believers.

In order that you may be living stones. Singing, praising stones, like those Jerusalem stones that Jesus declared would shout out if his disciples were to be silenced. Living stones who *proclaim the mighty acts of [God] who [has] called you out of darkness into [God's] marvelous light.*

Beloved, you are proclaimers of God's mighty acts. You are proclaimers of the good news of Jesus Christ. That's what you and I were made for. That's our purpose. That's what we do. That's who we are. We are proclaimers.

We are *grateful* proclaimers! Grateful, because we have received unfailing mercy. For we are God's own. We are children of the One in whom we are learning how to be part of a family. The family of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.