

"Living Stones." Acts 7:55-60; Ps. 31:1-5; 15-16; 1 Peter 2:1-10
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 20, 2008

Not too long ago it was Palm Sunday. Jesus was coming into Jerusalem and the authorities wanted him to tell his followers to tone it down. He told them if the disciples were silent the very stones themselves would shout "hosanna"!

It is hard to know when to take Jesus literally. Did he really mean that the stones would literally shout if his disciples didn't raise their voices in praise? Or is Jesus saying that it is just as unlikely for his disciples to stop praising as it is for stones to shout?

Or is this just a case of a little exaggeration, a bit of hyperbole designed to put the Pharisees in their place and put the momentous nature of his entry into Jerusalem into proper perspective?

If that were the case, why then didn't Jesus say something like: "Don't you know that, if these disciples were silent, I could call down angelic choirs to fill the earth with praise?" That would be more in keeping with the majesty and honor due to the king of heaven and earth!

After all, angels sang at his birth. Angels ministered to him in the desert. Angel armies will be waiting in the wings when he is in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yes, angels would have made appropriate praise!

We certainly don't expect stones to start singing praise to God. Why leave it to something as ordinary and run-of-the-mill as a stone? Angels, yes! But stones? Or is it in the very fact that since we least expect stones to sing out, it would be just that much more miraculous if they did.

Or, is Jesus reminding us of the God-infused nature of all things that makes even something as lowly as a stone a fitting member of the choir? Or are his words an echo of the Psalmist who calls on everything that has breath to praise the Lord? And if we cannot live up to our calling, then even the breathless stones will shame us with their singing!

This is a new use for stones...

But stones aren't usually seen in such a positive light unless they are doing something constructive like holding up the Temple or grinding olives. When they are shaped into things of permanence and purpose they are praiseworthy.

But, more often stones are used to settle disputes or silence voices. Stones will be used to take out Goliaths, or to silence Stephens. Stones will be used to create boundaries and to mark territory, to keep out those who do not belong on our side of the wall.

Until I went to Israel I had no idea that the country is mostly one huge pile of stones. Looking at the stones on the ridges and in the valleys, it's easy to see why they have been one of the weapons of choice for millennia.

When our rage boils over, we grope around for whatever is handy. And stones in Israel are very, very handy. Stones speak of

violence and rage and judgment sealed in blood. When words fail and reconciliation is out of reach, all too often we reach for a stone.

So, it's interesting to me that Jesus would have the stones be the next avenue of recourse, if words of praise failed to flow from the disciples' mouths. The stones are his back-up singers. They are waiting in the wings, ready to peal out a song of praise.

But, as it is, the stones mostly just lie there. They are neither good nor bad. In the hands of the artist they are shaped into things of beauty and constructive purpose. In the hands of an angry mob they are instruments of death.

I guess this is the place where I'm supposed to say: "Stones don't kill people. People kill people." And conversely: "Stones don't praise the One who comes in the name of the Lord, disciples are called to do that."

But here is where I want to make a transition from talking about stones to talking about Scripture and the Book of Order.

One of my seminary professors at Princeton incurred the wrath of some of the more conservative students in the class when he claimed that the Bible did not have authority if it just sat on the coffee table like a stone - unread and unused, like some kind of a touchstone, or talisman to grace the well-appointed Christian home.

Unopened and unused, what authority does it have? It is like a useless stone. Its authority comes to light as it is used in the community. Read and revered, it is a compendium of praise for

the God who has created us and redeemed us and inspired us to be a community of praise that cannot be silenced.

But, it can also be a rock pile out of which we draw sharp, lethal missiles designed to silence our opponents and defend what we take to be the righteousness of God.

The same can be said of our Presbyterian Book of Order. At its heart it is a book of praise, designed to show us how to build our Presbyterian "living stones" (as Peter would call us) into a spiritual house of grace and comfort for all God's people. It guides us as we offer up our praise to the living God by seeking to create a community that is ordered in obedience to Jesus Christ, the head and heart of our community.

But, this book can also be lifted up by those with angry hearts and closed minds to be used as a weapon with which to beat up an identified opponent.

So much depends on us - on our hearts and our hands, and our voices. Each time we gather we have the opportunity to let ourselves be built up like living stones into a spiritual house - to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

Or the possibility exists that we will choose our particular "stones" out of the Bible or the Book of Order to fashion weapons with which to silence an opponent who, like each of us, is also a child of God, made in the image of God, redeemed by the power of God and filled with the Pentecost Spirit of God!

How will we use these "stones" today? Will we take Peter's words to heart and believe that we are "a chosen race, a royal

priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light?"

Will we believe and rejoice in the knowledge that "once we were no people, but now we are God's people. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy"? And in knowing that we have received mercy, will we redouble our efforts to be merciful to others in our thoughts and words and our deeds?

Living Stones, let us praise our maker as we allow God to build us up into a spiritual house founded on the cornerstone of Christ.

Amen.