

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
May 10, 2020; 5th Sunday of Easter, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 7:54-8:1

The disciple Stephen confronted the people who through their hatred and selfishness opposed the Holy Spirit:

^{7:54} When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ 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. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ 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. ^{8:1} And Saul approved of their killing him.

SCRIPTURE READING 1 Peter 2:4-9

⁴ Come to [Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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." ⁷ 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," ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

SERMON *Hearts of Stone* Rev. Martin McGeachy

One of the reasons I'm glad to be Presbyterian is that we are a connectional church, which means all of our PC(U.S.A.) congregations are linked together both administratively and spiritually. We are never alone, in either tragedy or triumph. Some might bristle at the idea that a Presbytery, a regional higher governing body, can, and sometimes does, challenge one of its faith partners to follow the rules that we've all agreed to in our democratic system. Sure, no one likes to be told what to do, but honestly, we have an amazing amount of freedom as long as things are working. In fact, the Christian life is one of connectionalism. Although we have an astounding amount of freedom to believe in our own sometimes bizarre understanding of God (or maybe I'm projecting my own faith here), we also follow a culturally agreed-on set of rules: don't steal your neighbor's wallet. Okay? Most of us are down with that. And share with him if he's hungry. Right?

But in particular, right now I'm grateful for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) because in this time of uncertainty and what feels like shifting reality, we don't have to

go through it alone. On a practical level, by the way, Gilead has already received \$3,000 in emergency help from the denomination, but emotionally, I rely on our weekly ZOOM chats with other ministers and churches in our area, sharing both advice on what's working, but also a check-in on where we are in our hearts. Because in a time when we're all denied connection, we need to know we are still connected—I know you know what I mean.

As such, I know I'm not alone in feeling that for the first few weeks of this pandemic, I was actually filled with greater energy, rising to the occasion and feeling strong, up to the task. And now, after it has dragged on with no end in sight, I'm also not alone in feeling exhausted by the idea of sustaining the required energy for the long haul.

A many of you know, I like to focus on the positive, because frankly, focusing on the negative is a real downer, and hope lifts me up. So I've been looking at all the benefits we've been seeing for the last two months—a renewed appreciation for one another, a heightened awareness of how connected we are to our neighbors, the heroic medical responders and essential workers, and in fact you, sending in your donations and dropping off food for the Food Pantry. I have a stronger, sturdier faith in God and my neighbor than I did in January. And yet, I sometimes just want to cry at the sadness, death, pain, trauma, fear and uncertainty. One of my colleagues on ZOOM reminded us of the story in the book of Ezra when the people rebuilt the temple:

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away. Ezra 3:10-13 (NRSV)

Can anyone else relate? We are so grateful for the foundation that is laid in the LORD, that bedrock cornerstone that can withstand and always be built into something new, but oh, we grieve what we have lost, what we are losing. When we hear the story of the stoning of Stephen, are we moved to tears of grief by the cruelty of his stoning, his death, or moved to tears of joy by the vision that opened up for him right at that moment of horror, the sight of God and Jesus standing together to welcome him to heaven? The answer is both.

In 1st Peter we are called to be living stones, like Jesus, in our faith. What is it to be living? What is it to be stones? It is both, foundation, fear, grief and joy, belief and

doubt, and in that mixture of light and dark that makes up being alive, the ability to choose. To focus where our faith will grow—or not. For me, it is that focus on the positive, that I still choose even when I sometimes have to go lie down and cry.

One scientific definition of what is required to call something **living**, is that it must grow and develop, use energy, reproduce, respond to its environment, and adapt. Haven't you known a lot of people who don't seem to qualify on any of those? Or perhaps their faith and belief, and morals in action don't seem to grow, develop, respond or adapt. To be a living stone of Christ is to be built on his bedrock, strong and sturdy, but still growing, adapting, and indeed soft and giving.

I'm indebted to my colleague Dr. Doris Chandler, pastor of the Presbyterian church in Philipstown, NY, for posting this poem by Mary Oliver this week in anticipation of preaching on this text:

Do stones feel?
Do they love their life?
Or does their patience drown out everything else?

When I walk on the beach I gather a few
white ones, dark ones, the multiple colors.
Don't worry, I say, I'll bring you back, and I do.

Is the tree as it rises delighted with its many branches,
each one like a poem?

Are the clouds glad to unburden their bundles of rain?

Most of the world says no, no, it's not possible.
I refuse to think to such a conclusion.

Too terrible it would be, to be wrong. ("Do Stones Feel?" Mary Oliver, [Blue Horses](#))

If we are called to be a pile of rocks together, it would indeed be terrible to contemplate that we are not in the business of feeling, loving life, and interacting with the world. Dr. Doris quotes Joan Chittister, who says, "We exist to be miracle workers for one another, and it is in community that we come to see God in the other. It is in community that we see our own emptiness filled up. It is community that calls [us] beyond the pinched horizons of [our] own life, [our] own country, [our] own race, and gives us the gifts [we] do not have within [us]."

(Dr. Doris Chandler is posted online through the First Presbyterian Church of Philipstown, NY)

Do you have rocks in your head? Or is your mind a bedrock of faith and truth? Do you have a heart of stone that is dead, or a heart of stone that is alive? We think of our mothers as soft and huggable, but have you ever known anything stronger than the love of your mother? She is a Living Stone, full of love that is unbreakable.

Jesus tells a story about building houses on sand or rock. Obviously, the one built on sand will fall, while the solid foundation sustains the other. (Matthew 7:24-27)

But interestingly, sand is just tiny rocks. Life can be rocky, but we can choose whether we're walking in the shifting sand, or a slab of smooth boulder of love, warm in the light on top of the mountain of God.

How can a stone, a piece of rock, the very symbol of cold emotionless hardness, be the living stone that Jesus is, and that we are called to be? It's in how it's used. Who will we be today in this shifting reality? Like the disciple Peter, who will pick up the rock of faith and start building the church of Christ, or Saul and the crowd who picked up stones to use them as objects of violence and murder?

There are rocks all around us. Life is full of stumbling blocks that stub our toes, block our ways. And in every stone is a choice. Will we pick it up, and hurl it in anger, fear and frustration? Will we pull the rocks to ourselves and bury ourselves under their weight to try to protect us from the horrible world we see? Will they become our tombstones? Or will we use them to begin building, a foundation for a new world, new lives? If so, every stone ceases to be a slab of obstacle, and instead, because of our choices, and empowered by the Spirit, they become living stones on which a new world can be built. Stones are used to build walls, and walls are built either to keep things out, or hold things in. A wall made of living stones is one that is breathing and moving, that is designed to keep love in but is always welcoming more into the fold, for its rocks are ever adjusting to make room for more.

The Christian faith is not one of monastic solitude, for our primary calling is binary, to love God through Christ, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our faith is created, our stones come to life, when we reach out to God and to neighbor, and in reaching out, draw them into ourselves, making us all stronger. An ever-growing, always moving and yet more and more unshakeable wall of love, like a tidal wave is a wall of water washing over the land. An old story tells of a Spartan king boasting to a visiting dignitary of the great walls of Sparta. The visitor looked around but could see no walls. The king pointed to his guard, his troops, his people, and said, "These are the walls of Sparta, and every one of them a brick." Singly, they may not be that strong, but together, no one could rise against them. (Barclay, William, The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of James and Peter, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, p. 231)

Together, you and I are a wall of love, a wall of faith and strength that will persevere, but will change and grow. Next week isn't going to look like this one. As we look ahead at trying to reopen our communities, they will be different. We will grieve the old, but build the new in the faith of the Christ in whom all things are possible.

I decided last week that I can't keep thinking I'm in emergency mode anymore. That's what I can't sustain. And I can't wait for the "New Normal." I don't know when that's showing up. So right now, it's as normal as I choose to accept. I'm calling it the Now Normal. This IS. Or as God says, promising to be with us, in us, and our all in all, I AM. And you and I, all of us, are in this Now Normal together. We will weep with sadness, we will weep with joy, but our living faith is built on the rock of God's foundation, and nothing and no one can stand against it. Our church, you and I, will rise. We are on the ascent. Amen.