

“Stepping Stone”

Sermon – May 10, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

So here on this wintry Mother’s Day after 8 weeks of sheltering-at-home with more to come, should I preach from the lectionary on the first recorded stoning of a Christian, words to distressed exiles of the early church, or on scripture often used for funerals? How about all of them? Let’s start with the stoning from Acts 7.

Stephen is an interesting character and deserves to be known more than just being the first martyr. In the previous chapter of Acts the apostles are irritated that they are being distracted from preaching the word of God to make sure food is being fairly distributed.

So, they come up with the idea of the first deacons, selecting seven men to tend to the needs of others and Stephen was the standout. In fact, verse 8 of chapter 6 says, “Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” Mind you, this was a deacon—not one of the apostles.

In fact, he was doing so good that the priests and other religious leaders were upset and got false witnesses to say he was blaspheming. The high priest asks him if the accusations are true and in today’s chapter that we did not hear Stephen gives a long sermon. In fact, it is the longest, though not most eloquent, sermon among Peter, Paul, or even Jesus in Luke’s gospel. Again, Stephen’s job was a deacon, not a preacher.

Though his sermon is a defense of Jesus, that is not even alluded to until the end. The real thrust is his criticisms of the religious leaders of their infidelity to the faith as children of Abraham.

Today’s lectionary passage starts at verse 55 and 56 saying, “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. “Look,” he said, “I see the

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heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!””

This is the first and only physical appearance of God in all of Luke-Acts. Jesus only appears two other times in all of Acts of the Apostles: once in the beginning for his Ascension, which we will hear in a couple of weeks, and once to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus who later becomes known as Paul.

In the end, as ostensibly upstanding members of the religious community, guardians of vital traditions are stoning him, Stephen says, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” and then dies.

We see here a man who models trust in Jesus and forgiveness, even as he is being martyred. In fact, his life and death mirror that of Jesus right up through his trial and his final words. Stephen is called and serves others, just as Jesus did, but Stephen also does not shirk when challenged about his beliefs and yet maintains his love for people, even those who putting him to death.

The message for us isn’t so much as to be willing to die for your faith; it is whether we are truly willing to trust in Jesus and model him through our serving, loving, and forgiving of others. As Christianity has been the predominant religious factor in our culture, the question is not whether we are willing to be like Stephen. The question is are Christians today like the religious leaders who stoned him, too focused on their version of orthodoxy and not enough on modeling Christ?

The message of the cross is love and forgiveness—never hate, never fear-mongering. It is always seeking to serve God by humbly serving others and being open to change by the Holy Spirit in beliefs that have been more limiting than opening to others who are different. As God’s

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children, God has a “mother’s love” for each of us. Do we have the same?

That question is a major part of the book of Acts as this message of God’s love is extended from its Jewish roots to Gentiles. That is, to *everybody*. There has never been a more radical extension of inclusiveness than that, though try as we might over the centuries to limit that inclusiveness based on ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Today’s epistle lesson from 1 Peter chapter 2 underscores that. The author is writing to exiled converts of Asia Minor. They had become outsiders in their own communities, feeling isolated, and disconnected and all without Facetime or Zoom meetings.

One of the most striking features of this epistle that is written to Gentile—non-Jewish—believers is how often the Old Testament is quoted! Of the nine verses that make up our reading for this week, six of them are either alluding to or directly quoting Scripture.

The author uses these quotes to define the Christian community.

Of all the images employed in this letter, the root metaphor that best describes the Christian community comes from the beginning of verse 5, “like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”

The “living stone” imagery invites us to consider resurrection as a site of repurposed life and reconstruction. Resurrection life creates the environment to house and honor the presence of God within and beyond Christian communities.

Now that image can be construed as a physical place, like a “stone church”, but 1 Peter is saying our foundation is in Jesus who is the cornerstone who was rejected by people, but is of greatest value to God (2:4, 6).

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The church is a spiritual house, a spiritual community, whose fundamental vocation is the proclamation of the good news (2:9), not only in word but also—and perhaps primarily—in deed.

To sum up in brief [*slowly*]: As Christ is, so is the Christian. As the church this is our only calling—and our only hope.

Thus, the church—whether then or now—like “living stones” must resist the temptation to disparage this present world for some heavenly realm yet to come. The household of God is at once built on the spiritual cornerstone of Christ and rooted deeply in God's good creation.

We do not get a pass simply because we “believe” in Jesus. Too often “believe” is taken as a simple declaration of assent to a certain dogma. It is far more than that.

Like those new converts in 1 Peter, Christians today need to deepen their sense of what it means to belong to this spiritual house, being stepping stones to help others stand up, not stumbling blocks to cause them to fall.

In the gospel lesson from John Jesus plants this notion of a “spiritual house.”

You may know many of these verses from chapter 14 from funerals where they are offered as comfort to those who have lost someone.

But these are words not only about life after death, but also what we do with our lives here and now.

The first two familiar verses are, “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?”

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Two key points here. One is the phrase “Believe in God, believe also in me.”

The Greek word, *pisteuó* (pist-YOO-oh), can also be translated as “believe” or as “trust.” So, we could say, “Trust in God, trust also in me.” Our faith is not just having conviction about God; it is trusting in God, not just for the afterlife, but for *this* life with all its trials and tribulations and COVID-19.

The second point is related. It is the phrase of “many dwelling places”, but we could, for linguistic purposes, also use the word “abode” because the Greek word here for “dwelling place” is related to another word that we translate as “abide”, as when Jesus later says, “Abide in me, as I abide in you.”

So, when Jesus says, he goes to prepare our “abodes” and later says he “abides” in us, we see we have Jesus with us *now*; we don’t have to wait until we die to have God “dwell” in us. He is with us now as the cornerstone of our “spiritual house.”

Jesus says in verse 12, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes (trusts) 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.”

That may be hard to believe, particularly as we look around. Yet wherever there is healing, reconciling, life-giving work happening, this is the work of God. Wherever there is life in abundance, this is Jesus’ presence in our midst, Christ abiding with in the abodes he has prepared.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in Christ.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.

Amen.

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Rang the bells Thursday (show NH church on Helen’s phone)

Zoom Hospitality Time at 1130

Session meeting Monday evening by Zoom.

Virtual worship services for at least the next couple of weeks; need to prepare.

Happy Mother’s Day, particularly for my wife who 40 years ago today gave birth—to the surprise of everyone—of twins. So, we also have a joy of Jesse and Leanne having their birthday today. If they feel like they are getting old, think how Helen and I feel.

Tom Foltz’ adult son last of chemo for Stage IV esophageal cancer.

Shawn Nighbert’s father below the knee amputation from infection/diabetes.