

*[Credit Dr. Ron Bradley at Roswell Baptist Church for the concept of giving out stones.
During the sermon stones will be distributed to the congregation.
Those reading this manuscript are invited to hold a stone in their hand while doing so.]*

“Stones”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 22, 2011

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Acts 7: 54-60; 8:1 John 14: 1-14

Acts 7: 54-60; 8:1

The Stoning of Stephen

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.

John 14: 1-14

Jesus the Way

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² 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? ³ 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. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ 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’? ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

Thank you, Chancel Choir, for the faith and hope you express so beautifully
through God’s gift of music. Let the church say, “*Amen!*”

In light of the Judgment Day that did not happen yesterday,
please forgive me if I was tempted to request,

that the Chancel Choir sing Barry Manilow’s ‘70s classic,

“Looks Like We Made It”.

Yesterday on NPR’s “*Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me*”, host Peter Sagal said that

“This weekend it’s the scheduled time for the Rapture,

*according to a prominent religious leader.
So if you find yourself listening to our show,
there are really just two possibilities.
Either none of us made the cut, or
...and I think this is more likely, this is Heaven.”*

On Friday afternoon my brave hairstylist Tracey Howard
was asking me about Judgment Day.

Tracey came to her own conclusion:

she would put me down for an appointment in a couple months
or else, she said, *“I’ll just see you on the other side.”*

Well, my friends, here we are.

Rumors of our demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Good thing.

We’ve got work to do, families to raise and enjoy, fun to have,

music to sing and dance to, books to read, stories to share, care to give,

vocations to be lived into and fulfilled for the glory of God,

and a world to save

through the hope and grace of a forgiving and
loving Christ.

Let’s get to it,

and invest our energy in the positive.

Where do we go from here?

Always start where you are right now.

Right now would everyone please get up, come forward, and select a stone.

After you have selected a stone please return to your seat,

and hold it in your hand.

Our Deacons are prepared to bring you a stone

if for any reason you cannot come forward.

(Stones are distributed.)

Stones.

Please hold your stone throughout the message this morning.

Feel it's weight, it's heft, it's texture, it's rough and smooth surfaces,

it's presence in your life at this moment.

The Holy Scriptures have a way of connecting with us in the moment.

The Word addresses the human condition.

We may think that we are examining the Holy Bible

only to discover that the Bible is examining us.

We turn the pages on our Bible to read words spoken and set down so long ago,

only to discern that the Word is still speaking today.

Genesis presents to us a Living Word that has the power to create,

one that moves over the face of the waters and brings order out of chaos.

Isaiah promised that the Word of God will not return unfulfilled.

Jesus proclaimed that the Word will not be squelched, sequestered, or silenced.

When religious authorities asked Jesus of Nazareth

to tell his followers to be quiet, he said,

“I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would shout out.”

(Luke 19: 40)

Stones.

Stones may have meaning.

I've got a collection of stones from countries visited and mountains climbed.

Stones have a tale to tell.

Jesus asked his disciples, *“Who do you say that I am?”*

Simon Peter answered, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*

And Jesus answered him, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!*

I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,

and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16: 15-18)

Here Jesus makes a nice play on words.

You are Peter/Petras. On this rock/petros.

Petras is the petros.

You are the cornerstone of the church.

On you, the living stones of God, Christ will build his church.

Blessed are you!

The church needs you and wants you to be a living stone, a foundation of faith.

We are truly blessed

to be given the grace and the opportunity to be the Body of Christ.

There are days and times when all is smooth sailing,

and days and times when the way is hard.

One can be blessed and still have a difficult path;

blessed, and still not be received or welcomed;

blessed, and still be rejected or persecuted for Christ's sake;

blessed, and still feel the sting and pain of thrown stones.

When Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount,

he taught his followers a tough word, saying:

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are you when people revile you
and persecute you*

and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad,

for your reward is great in heaven,

for in the same way they persecuted the prophets

who were before you.” (Matthew 5: 1, 10-12)

You know, the fact is that prophets were persecuted right after Jesus said this.

John the Baptist was killed.

Jesus was crucified, and after he was resurrected from the dead into life everlasting,

every single one of his disciples and apostles encountered hard times
and met with persecution, and even death. Yet they all lived in
peace.

Can you die a violent death in peace?

Are you willing to suffer for Christ, by whose stripes we have been healed and forgiven?

Will you consciously make a decision that no matter what befalls you,

you will serve and speak,

be and share,

live and, if necessary, die for Jesus Christ?

Say yes, I will be a living stone for God,

and the peace of Christ will live in your heart forever and ever,

and no amount of thrown stones can ever knock you from grace.

For example, Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

He was blessed and called to deliver the Good News.

The stoning of Stephen began long before he preached in Jerusalem;

it started long before the first rock was picked up and heaved in his direction.

It began when he decided to be a disciple of Christ.

Stephen chose to live his life dedicated and committed to the ways of God.

He chose to live like Christ.

He made a conscious decision to speak, share, serve,

and, if necessary, suffer and die like Christ.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said that if a person

“has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

A tough word, yes,

yet one that I read every day as I grew up

because King’s image and words were emblazoned

on a poster in my bedroom

and influenced my own level of commitment and
courage,

along with millions more.

Commit yourself to a life of service above self.

Commit yourself to a new world order based on love.

Commit yourself to letting God direct your life to be the change the world needs today.

Stephen made a commitment,

and this was a commitment at the highest level,

a level of commitment that any and all of us can attain.

We have before us in the book of the Acts of the Apostles a sermon by Stephen.

Carl Holladay, professor at Candler School of Theology, points out that in Acts 6 and 7,

Stephen “rehearses Israel’s history

from the call of Abraham down to the time of Solomon’s temple.

It is a highly provocative sermon, to say the least.

He argues that God's abiding presence
cannot be confined to sacred buildings.

Furthermore, Stephen states the case
that some of God's most decisive encounters
with the patriarchs Abraham, Joseph and Moses
happened outside the land of Israel.”[1]

The Gospel of Jesus Christ poses a similar challenge

to those who claim him as Lord and Savior.

Christ is bigger than the church;

the Spirit is found in yet not confined to sacred buildings;

God's will is to choose to have decisive encounters

with a diversity of souls in all the lands of the world.

Folks, this was a spoken word on the Word which did not go over well at all.

Consider the audience.

The audience who heard this message was made up of

Jewish temple loyalists who were gathered in Jerusalem.

“When they heard these things,

they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.

But filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen looked up into the heavens

and saw God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Excitedly he told those near him what he witnessed.

*“‘Look,’ Stephen 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.” (Acts 7: 56-57)

Stones.

You and I do not need to look far and wide for weapons of mass destruction.

Sticks and stones and harsh words are readily available.

Projectiles are as close as the stones in our own hands.

Nor do we have to think for very long to remember the pain of being a victim.

Such memories are all too readily available.

Our scars are skin deep and our wounds go deeper still.

What does the faith have to say to victims?

What does faith have to say to assailants?

What does faith about this to the human condition?

Stones.

“Sticks and stones can hurt my bones, but words can never harm me.”

Who were they kidding?

We've been victimized by all of the above.

To victims, faith offers a word of healing and hope.

You are not defined by whatever or whoever has victimized you.

Stephen looked up and saw both God and Jesus Christ in the heavens.

Look up, and know that no matter what befalls you, Christ is present.

Jesus said, *"I am with you, and will not leave you orphaned..."*

[comfortless...desolate.]" (John 14: 18)

God is present;

God's love is the power which eases our pain;

God's promise is made known as our wounds are healed.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said so pastorally and prophetically,

"Underserved suffering is redemptive."

Stephen was unjustly attacked and abused and killed.

Has anyone prejudged you and hurt your feelings?

Ever had your own enthusiasm thwarted by someone else's anger?

Has someone rushed to judgment and stepped all over you?

When we are victims we feel as if we are not in control.

So what can we control?

Stephen decided that he had the power to forgive.

He had the power to pray for those who reviled and persecuted him.

Even though his assailants did not say they were sorry,

nor did they ask for forgiveness, nor did they stop their vicious ways,

Stephen, like Jesus on the cross on Calvary, forgave them.

He looked at his oppressors and forgave them when

“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.”

The promise of Easter is that death has lost its sting.

Stephen died, but his faith and his life’s work lived on.

Stephen could look up and see the heavens and know that this is not the final chapter.

His oppressors will not have the last word, the last say, nor make the last point.

There is so much more to Stephen’s story.

Being a victim does not mean all is lost or that life is over and done.

The Bible tells us that after Stephen saw the heavens open,

“they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him;

...the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And Saul approved of their killing him.”

Years later Saul was still persecuting Christians

when the heavens opened

and God appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

God said, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* (Acts 9: 4)

Struck blind and then ministered to by Christians until his sight returned,

Saul changed his name to Paul,
committed his soul to Christ,
and began a mission of starting faith communities.

After Jesus Christ, for better or for worse,
no one has been more influential in the church than Paul.

There is much for us to learn from this,
including the Good News that no matter what our past,
God and God's people are fully committed
to changing our present
for the sake of the future.

Come into Christ's church just as you are,
regardless of your yesterdays,
and have faith that God is nigh.

See, my friends, the heavens are open and Jesus stands at the right hand of God!

Stones.

What does the faith have to say to assailants?

Words and actions do matter; they can be used to violate and do violence.

I stand as one who has thrown far too many stones;

I've spoken way too many unkind words;

I've participated in acts of violence.

Stones in my hands have flown through the air and found their targets.

Stones were sitting on the ground when Stephen's assailants used them as weapons.

Before they picked up one single rock, they covered their ears and rushed at him.

Have you ever convinced yourself that wrong is right?

Ever rush to judgment?

Ever harass someone in front of your face or on FaceBook?

Just because you can does not mean you should.

Do you think it is possible for you to lose control and do the unthinkable?

Have you covered your ears

and refused to listen to someone else's excitement and joy in seeing God?

How about shouting down or striking out at someone

whom you think opposes you?

Fellow assailants, let us confess our sins of hastiness.

Let us apologize for when we've used loud words with evil intent,

or raised fists or weapons in order to dominate

without concern for the harm we cause.

Let us turn to the Living Christ,

the one who receives and reconciles our spirits

with an eye toward justice and mercy.

Let us pray that our Lord will not hold this sin against us.

May Christ cleanse our souls and send us forth

with a clearer sense of our connectedness with one another.

May we open our eyes to see the holy in all our relationships.

May our lips offer praise instead of put downs.

May we unclench our fists, set down our stones, and extend hands of hope.

Stones.

A documentary was made of a confession booth that was set up at a festival.

Many of the people attending the festival were in the GBTL community

(the gay, bisexual, transgender, and lesbian community).

Periodically people would step into the confession booth.

To their surprise the priest opened the conversation, saying,

“Forgive me, for the church has sinned in thought, word, and deed.

We are so sorry for the grief and harm we have caused to you and yours.

Please do not hold our sin against us. Please accept our sincerest apology.”

Festival participants stumbled out of the confession booth

in shock, in tears, with smiles, with relief, with a story to tell,

with a new way of life to consider and contemplate.

Some people left the booth thinking,

“Maybe now I could make a commitment to such a faith and church.”

I cannot begin to tell you how many wounded souls I have encountered

who have been victims --

and many have been victims of the church --

and how surprising and healing it is

to hear one who represents so many assailants

(straight, white, male, Christian, American,
privileged)

to say, "*On behalf of the Body of
Christ, I am sorry.*"

Stones

No matter where you see yourself in this story of judges and one judged,

the Good News is that God still calls you to a ministry of grace.

Whether we are a victim or assailant or both, we can't change our pasts.

We can change the present by moving toward a new future.

For the past twenty minutes you have been holding in your hand a stone.

You may take this stone with you if you choose.

Or, you can let it go.

When you are ready, let it go, let it drop to the floor,

and leave it behind,

a part of your past that you want to release and let be.

Let go of a painful past in which you have been attacked or abused.

Let go of the urge to retaliate.

Let go of the need to seek revenge.

Let go of the desire to rush to judge and to determine someone else's fate.

Let go of the weight of whatever holds you back, or down, or out, and move into a new future.

Let go of your stone, and let God into your life.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[1] Holladay, Carl, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A, Lent and Easter. Abingdon Press. P. 199-200.