

Sermon 5.3.26
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
John 14:1-14

"There are sermons in stones, books in the running brooks and good in everything." Shakespeare, As You Like It, (Act II scene 1)

More than ever the church needs to be ready to respond to seekers, especially people in despair seeking answers. Today's scriptures are full of rich images that both provide comfort that God is with us in all things, and the fact that much is also expected of us as people of faith. What messages can we give by the way we live into the Christian journey? And notice the stone imagery in today's scriptures – in what ways are stones used to talk about our faith? We will address that throughout this sermon.

Acts 7:55-60

You may have noticed that during the Easter season Sunday lectionary, the Old Testament lesson has been replaced with a story from Acts about the formation of the church by the disciples turned apostles, the followers of the Way who became teachers of the Way. Today we read about the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr known by name. In this case stones are used as a weapon, and in the rest of the passages today, these "weapons have been turned into plowshares" so to speak.

But this scene does indicate that the early Christians' lives were at stake for their beliefs, something we should never forget. This passage from Acts also introduces Saul, who as you know persecuted followers of the Way, and later was converted on the road to Damascus on his way to rounding up folks for persecution. He was the only apostle who did not meet the living Jesus, yet became the most famous Apostle, re-named Paul, whose letters comprise 2/3 of the New Testament. Although he was a former Jewish zealot, and was a and is still a controversial figure, known also for his misogynistic attitude towards women yet his brilliant

teachings on justification by grace. His life exemplifies how God can and does sometimes transform and use unlikely people to bring others to the faith.

John 14:1-14

- In today's gospel we find a loving picture of heaven – the image of a house with many dwelling places.
 - Imagine a weaving where the shuttle goes back and forth along the weft creating repeated patterns
 - In the same way time seems to shift back and forth in our Easter season lectionary between the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and his sermon to his disciples in John at the Last Supper, where he prepared them for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In this way they would not fear life without his physical presence, or fear the beginning the work of the Jesus movement without their leader.
 - Then Thomas asked, “How can we know the way?” “I am the way, the truth and the life...and the Spirit will be your guide”, is Jesus' simple yet profound response.
 - These two promises, that of a caring relationship throughout eternity, and guidance in every situation in *this* life, are meant to provide total trust in our Lord in all circumstances.
 - Certainly these messages are inviting to those who are feeling intensely the anxiety and uncertainty in the nation and world today as well.
- **1 Peter 2:2-10**
 - The message from 1 Peter starts out with a maternal image of being nurtured spiritually from the beginning of our walk with Jesus, and which leaves us longing for more nourishment..
 - Like newborn infants, we long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it we may grow into salvation, Peter says, if indeed we have tasted that the Lord is good.
 - In addition are these compelling verses:
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.

- Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

By quoting these Old Testament scriptures, Peter is saying that just as the ancient Israelites, his listeners should be proud to have been chosen to be God's people. However along with the covenant promises comes responsibility, like rejoicing in the honor of proclaiming his name as well as the growing desire to have ongoing nourishment in the Word.

A church that loves to sing together and praise God together will be inviting and welcoming. Jesus said this during his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem when told by the Pharisees to silence his disciples, "I tell you, if these people those praising me were silent, the very stones would cry out!" This signifies that worship is essential, indicating that praise for God is vital and will happen, even if humanity remains silent, highlighting the certainty of God's glory.

- We also find stone imagery in 1 Peter.
 - Just like Jesus, Peter uses familiar images in his storytelling, in this case something that is common in the middle east geography – lots of stones!
 - In Old Testament tradition the High Priest's breastplate contained 12 different, precious stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. (see Exodus)
 - 'Come to him, a living stone' – names Jesus with this strong image, because he is in fact the cornerstone of our faith; and then we as followers are like stones built into the temple of God, a faithful people called out of the darkness into the light.
 - The Henri Nouwen society used mosaic stones in a lovely pattern in a reflection last week. The late H. Nouwen was a priest, professor, and spiritual writer of our times whose

tender language always spoke to our complex world in a way that created the possibility of harmony. He wrote,

- “We all reflect God’s love in different ways. Together we are like a mosaic. In a mosaic one stone is bright, another gold, another small. If we look closely, we can admire the beauty of each stone, yet when we step back from it, we can see that all the little stones reveal a beautiful picture of and tell a story that none of the stones can tell by itself. Together the different stones reflect the face of God in the world.” **1**
- *In what ways might we be able to step back and see the bigger picture of the beauty of our spiritual community? “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”*
1 Cor. 12:17

- May 8 is the Feast Day of Julian of Norwich, an English anchoress who experienced a vision in 1373, and wrote about it in *Showings or Revelations of Divine Love* — the earliest surviving book by a woman in the English language. – (share various key readings)
 - One of her Key ideas from the Revelations of Divine Love is found in this quote about how every single aspect of God’s creation, including each and every person, being precious to God.

“He showed me a little thing the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind's eye and I thought,

'What can this be?'

And the answer came, 'It is all that is made'. I marveled that it could last, for I thought it might have crumbled to nothing, it was so small.

And the answer came into my mind, 'It lasts and ever shall because God loves it'. And all things have being through the love of God.” **3**

- Whether we are all like stones in a mosaic, or hazelnuts in the palm of God's hand, in general we must not be afraid to try a few new things to keep St. John's relevant in our community.

In closing, at our clergy retreat last week, at Shrinemont, we were encouraged to spend time talking with our congregations about the Seven principal kinds of prayer discussed in our Book of Common Prayer (BCP 856-857) **2**

I have decided to include one of these themes as part of our early summer sermons. These forms of prayer are:

Adoration, Praise, Thanksgiving, Penitence, Oblation, Intercession and Petition.

Immersed in prayer, we might also perceive some exciting ways to grow and shine forth in the coming months! The important thing to remember is the thread woven throughout today's scriptures, is that the new church was experiencing its birth, and was promised it would ultimately be able to do even more than Jesus.

For he said, in John 14:12

¹²Very 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. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me^[a] for anything, I will do it.

So let's figure out what to ask for so that we can be even more inviting to those seeking beloved community in troubled times.

So we started with stones of persecution, a sign of the cost of discipleship for many of the early Christians. Then in the Psalms is the image of God as our tower of strength. Then in the lesson from 1 Peter we see Jesus described as the precious cornerstone of our faith, and we are the living stones of this great Mother Church, as St. Augustine called her, who feeds the world with spiritual food. And we know that if we did not sing God's praise the very stones would cry out in song, Hosannah, Hosannah.

Now to the One in whom we live and move and have our being, may we glorify God in all we do.

Amen

Resources

1. Henri Nouwen Society; *Beauty in Difference*; Daily Meditation; May 1, 2026
2. Book of Common Prayer; Outline of Faith; Prayer and Worship; p. 856-7
3. Julianna of Norwich; [The Revelations of Divine Love](#); Hazelnut showing