

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
May 18, 2014

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Texts: Psalm 23 & John 14: 1-14

There are stones. And there are stones. Like so many things in our world, they can be good things. Or harmful. Natural elements that are essential to life—water, fire, wind—become destructive and deadly as floods, forest fires, and tornadoes. Commodities like money can be very good when used, like the coins in our little blue boxes and our outreach funds, for the benefit of programs that feed and provide education and health care for those who would otherwise be without these basic necessities of living. To build up community, God's Kingdom. But that very same money, when accumulated in greed or used to exert power over others, becomes a means of dividing that community.

And so it is with the stones in today's scripture readings. In the early Christian community described in the book of Acts, Stephen, one of the group of first deacons, is put to death with stones used as weapons. His crime? Preaching the good news of Jesus Christ risen. Pointing out how prophets had often been mistreated for their messages.

In Peter's letter, though, the stones become the foundation of the community of Christ, the cornerstone. And each of us, "like living stones...built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood."

I cannot hear the words "living stones" without immediately thinking of a man I first met in 1997 in the hills of Galilee. And again ten or so years later, in Evanston Illinois, where he gave the commencement address at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Christian and recently retired Melkite priest and Archbishop of Galilee, is a real live saint and prophet whose entire life has been devoted to working toward reconciliation among Israeli Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He, through his work and example, has affirmed the possibility of living side by side in peace in the midst of animosity and conflict.

One of the ways he does that is by urging groups of Christians who are planning visits to the Holy Land to see more than the "dead stones" of the holy sites. To meet the "living stones," the people of Palestine, to hear their stories and learn of their struggles. But he does not do this with the intent of encouraging the visitors to take sides or to contribute to the conflict but, rather, to promote peace.

Abuna (Father) Chacour and his family, who trace their Christian roots to the 1st century, lived peacefully with their Jewish neighbors until they were forced from their village in 1948

when he was eight years old. That, of course, was when the State of Israel was created and many were displaced. He became a priest and was sent to a small village, Ibillin, for what was to have been a temporary placement of only three months. He has spent most of his life--over 50 years--there. "I forgot myself," he told us. Forgot himself, in service to God.

Possibly his greatest contribution has been the creation of a school for all the children of Israel—Christian, Jew, Muslim. In the face of bureaucracy and political roadblocks and his inability to get building permits, he persisted. Lack of funds, police raids, and court orders could not stop him. During one of many arrests, he was reminded that he could not build without a permit, to which he replied, "I build with sand, cement, with cinder blocks, steel, and wood, not with permits." The lack of electricity was not an insurmountable problem, either. He simply ran a single cable from a nearby house and moved it from floor to floor as needed in the school. He justifies his non-violent civil disobedience as serving God by following in Christ's footsteps, bringing healing and hope to the lives of his people. And bringing a vision that creates the possibility of a future for the youth.

Being a priest among Palestinian people living in Israel, he says, does not mean blindly keeping oppressive human laws but rather asking God for the wisdom to pursue actively what is just and right for all human beings.

His tenacity—and audacity—has blossomed into a secondary school, a gymnasium, a library, and now a college. When we visited in 1997, it was a diverse community of more than 1,600 students and 135 teachers who are Christians, Moslems, Druze, and Jews learning to live and work together. It has now expanded to more than 4,500. He has been, I think, a "living stone" among living stones.

There is no mention of stones in our Gospel lesson from John. But I believe the stones are there. The question is, are they "living stones" or are they weapons?

This is such a well known reading from John—it is part of what is known as the "Farewell Discourse"—words shared in the intimate setting of the Last Supper. Loving words to help the disciples understand what was about to happen to Jesus *and* what would become of them after his life on this earth was finished. These first verses are ones that we often hear at funerals because it brings us that comforting promise that Jesus gave the disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you." "In my Father's house are many dwelling places." "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

But the disciples, as usual, misunderstand. They want a map, a GPS. So, Jesus tries again with an "I AM" statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "No one comes to the Father

except through me.” And it is these words that, when taken out of this intimate setting, when divorced from the rest of the Gospel, when removed from John’s community struggling to find its new identity, it is these words that can become weapons. Like the “I AM” statement from last week, “I AM the gate” they are used to judge and to exclude.

Scholar Karoline Lewis says, that

The “I AM” statements in the Fourth Gospel make known Jesus as the source of life, abundant grace, and...signal the very presence of God. Yet, removed from the conversation between Jesus and Thomas, and from the situation of Jesus’ last alone time with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, this particular “I AM” statement in the Gospel of John has turned into evidence for and proof of Jesus as the sole means of salvation [and] then stands as contradictory to every other “I AM” statement in the Fourth Gospel.... “No one comes to the Father except through me” rather than a word of promise becomes a declaration of prohibition.¹

Last week at our diocesan Fresh Start gathering, Bishop Lee reminded us that what we have in these words is not a doctrine or a list of precepts that we must agree to. It is a person, a relationship.

Yes, it is a person, one loved by those who followed him. One who revealed to them and to us who God is, made God known through Jesus life and ministry. One whose promise is that they and we are already in God’s presence.

And not only that, He makes another promise, one that tends to get less of our our attention, “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...”

We are living stones. This discourse is not just about the life eternal that awaits us, but the Kingdom right here and now. And our part in it! It is promise and assurance that we dwell in God— and God dwells in us—today and every day.

Preaching professor at Luther Seminary, David Lose admits that this is a lot for us to take in. And he offers a suggestion: an invitation to a time of prayer.²

So, I invite you to be in a prayerful state and call to mind, first, people that you have loved and lost. Name them, picture their faces, call to mind what it is you loved about that person.

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on John 14:1-14" *Preaching This Week*, May 18, 2014, www.workingpreacher.org.

² David Lose, "Sheer Pro,isle," *Dear Working Preacher*, May 12, 2014, www.workingpreacher.org.

[As folks engage in this practice, repeat Jesus' word slowly, quietly: "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?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." Close this part of the prayer exercise with these words, "Jesus lived, died, was raised again, and ascended to the God that we may have life, here and forever, in abundance. That is his promise."]

Now, think about a challenge in your own life, something you are worried about, something you wonder whether you have the strength and wherewithal to confront.

[As they engage in this part of the exercise, repeat these words of Jesus, "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." And then close the time of prayer with these words, "We live in the light of the promises of Jesus, the one who came to reveal God's love for the world."]

With Abuna Chacour and other real live saints, with ordinary people we encounter, we are living stones. And with Christ our cornerstone, each stone, stone upon stone upon stone, builds God's Kingdom. May we dwell together in the House of the Lord. Amen.