

Stones

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2017

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Texts: Acts 7.55-60;
Psalm 31.1-5, 15-16;
1 Peter 2.2-10;
John 14.1-14

Some of you know on May 1 it was my turn to be one of the delegates to the meeting of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes. If you aren't familiar with our system of governance in the RCA, all that means is it was a regional gathering of elders and ministers. We have the more local Classis which for us is right here in Holland, then the Regional Synod, and the national body is called the General Synod.

I was a bit anxious going into the day. I posted on my facebook page how I had prepared for the meeting because I knew that I was walking into the center of colliding paradigms; the very paradigm Pastor Gordon preached about so beautifully last week. When paradigms collide, tensions have a way of rising. I knew what was on the agenda; that we would be wrestling once again over issues of human sexuality and marriage. I knew I would be in the minority in this setting advocating for the full embrace and celebration of the fact that God's gifts and Holy Spirit are being poured out on all us in our various sexual orientations and gender identities. I knew that it was going to be a long and painful day.

So as I walked up to the church where we would be meeting for the day, I picked up a stone. I placed it in my hand and I prayed with words that were still echoing in my mind from 1 Peter chapter 2 which I read just a few days before it. I wanted to stay connected to the living stone – the one that had been rejected by mortals but chosen and precious in God's sight – the one the builders had rejected but has nonetheless stood firm as the cornerstone. I wanted to stay connected to the truth that whoever believes in this one will not be put to shame.

I wanted to walk into that meeting with a very clear sense of where my hope lies. My hope is not in the RCA – this denomination that I love – that has nurtured my faith from infancy teaching me to long for pure, spiritual milk described in this text; helping me to grow into salvation – the place where I have indeed tasted that the Lord is good. The RCA is not where my hope lies.

I'll be honest. It remains to be seen whether the RCA can weather this particular storm. The divisions between us are deep and touch pieces of our theology: how we interpret scripture, what we mean by authority, and how we will inhabit the grace and truth that God has entrusted to us. But my hope is not in the RCA. This particular denomination may be on the verge of crumbling. I don't know. We've come close to these moments in the past and eventually found our way but I don't know if we will this time. It's certainly not where my hope lies.

My hope lies in what will remain when the dust clears – the center of our faith – the living stone – the one who has shown us the marvelous light of God. We are God's people and that will remain true no matter what form our life together takes.

The book of 1 Peter is a welcome companion when we find ourselves walking in new and uncertain territory. Especially if the new terrain carries with it a certain amount of rejection and suffering. This book speaks to believers who are trying to be faithful when the circumstances around you are kicking up anxiety and fear. These are anxious times! You may not feel as connected to what is happening in the RCA. Maybe for you it's more about what is happening in national politics or much closer to home with the dynamics of your marriage or your sobriety or health or your finances. 1 Peter speaks right into the heart of our anxiety and invites us to remember where our hope lies – in WHOM – our hope lies.

But I picked up this stone for a second reason having to do with something entirely different. Because in reading the texts for this Sunday which I did right before that Regional Synod meeting, there was another story about a different kind of stone. Not speaking any longer about the living stone – Jesus Christ – the cornerstone but speaking instead about the stones that

we pick up in violence to release the rage we cannot control. I don't know how you view these stories about stoning's. I don't know if you see them as vestiges of some uncivilized past. I think I once did. But not anymore.

I recognize now that they are no different than the lynching's that took place in this country not very long ago. They are not different from riots that erupt in the face of perceived injustice or the instances of excessive force that go on among those charged to protect and defend. None of us can claim to be above this kind of violent response. Even if we never raise a hand or take a stone or pull a gun, we have the capacity to tear people apart with our words and with a look and a strategically placed tweet or post. I picked up this stone because I knew I was entering a place where the anxiety was high and my passions ran deep and I wanted to be reminded of this impulse from which I am not immune.

I want to look with you at two pieces from this text that might guide us when we find ourselves in these treacherous spaces wherever they may be. The first is a positive example to emulate and the second is a negative example to avoid.

But first the positive, it's interesting to note that when the crowds are closing in on him, Steven simply bears witness to what he is experiencing of God in that moment. He is given a vision of God's glory and he simply shares it with them. He doesn't give them a lecture. He doesn't try to argue with them. He doesn't clap back with some witty, withering judgment. Very early on in the organizing of the Room for All movement in the RCA, we learned from those who had gone before us that finding ways to tell your story is far more effective in changing hearts and minds than anything else.

Stephen was the first in a long line of martyrs in the early centuries of the church. This was their consistent strategy: to simply but boldly bear witness to their experience of God. I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that when you find yourself in the face of oppression that you should never speak up or speak out. I'm not advocating passivity or resignation. As you trace the ministry of Jesus and of the first apostles they are bold and at times withering in calling out hypocrisy and injustice. Read

Stephen's sermon to the religious leaders just before this text. He is no shrinking violet. But in the moment when the debates turn violent, Stephen follows in the footsteps of Jesus. He refuses to join them in taking up stones.

So that's the first piece - to keep voicing your story - to keep bearing witness to when and where and how you are experiencing God. What people will do with that witness is frankly not our business.

The second piece is the response of the crowd. I was pointed toward this in one of the commentaries I was reading and it's the negative example - the one to avoid. As Stephen is bearing witness to what he is seeing - the glory of God being shown to him in a vision, in the very next sentence it tells us that the "crowds covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him."¹ Here's the reflection of the commentator on that verse: "In the commission of inhumane acts, one must forcibly shut out the humanity of the person who is subjected to it, in order to carry out the act. Their violence against (Stephen) begins with stopping their own ears and shouting over his voice, obliterating his testimony."²

It starts when we are really young; this impulse to close our ears to the things we do not want to hear. Can't you just see the toddler with hands literally over their ears shouting over the parent saying something they don't want to hear? We've become ever so slightly more subtle in our refusals to hear the "other" whoever the "other" is for us in the moment. But only slightly. And this story reveals how dangerous it is when we go there.

Stones....they can be used as weapons or foundations. They can be used to destroy or to build. I am keeping this stone close at hand maybe you'd like to find one for yourself to remind us who is the center stone of our life and of the church and to remind us who we want to be as we engage this anxious world in which we live. Amen? Amen.

¹ Acts 7.57, NRSV

² Susan B.W. Johnson, *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 450.