

Living Stones

Act 7:55-60 CEB But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. ⁵⁶ He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God's right side!" ⁵⁷ At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, ⁵⁸ threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" ⁶⁰ Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

CEB 1 Peter 2:2-5, 9-10 Like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation, ³ since you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴ Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. ⁵ You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. ¹⁰ Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

CEB John 14:11 Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves. ¹² I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it. ¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

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I've avoided today's passage from the gospel according to John for many years. Taken at face value, the claims of the text didn't match experience and so they seemed preposterous. We will do greater works than Jesus himself? Really? When we ask for anything in Jesus' name, it will be granted? I haven't found that to be a certainty! But, of course I, and many other people, have been misreading the passage. Many of us grew up in traditions that seem to have been fundamentally concerned with proving that Jesus was – and is – divine. And one of the most important ways to prove this is that Jesus performed miracles. The miracles "proved" that Jesus was supernatural, that he was the Son of God, and when you believed that and declared that Jesus was your Savior, then you would go to heaven when you died. And that was all that mattered. So, we would get lost in the miracles because they were essential for everything that followed. I heard this passage as saying, "Believe that I am the Son of God because of my miracles, and if you believe that, you will do even greater miracles than I have done, and if you end your prayers with the phrase 'in Jesus' name' I will grant whatever you ask for." I don't know about you, but I prayed for a lot of things "in Jesus' name" and often the answer to my prayers was "No." No, I didn't make an "A" on the test; no, the most beautiful senior girl didn't accept my request for a date; no, I didn't get the job; no, my unborn twin sons didn't live.

My problem began when I got lost in the miracles. When Jesus performed miracles, it wasn't to prove that he was divine. If that was the point, he could have chosen to make trees walk on water, have people fly through the air doing loops, or made the moon turn green with orange stripes. Instead, miracles only served as tools for the real point he was making. People were hungry, people were sick, people were suffering, and in compassionate love, Jesus relieved suffering. His works were works of love and compassion for others. Jesus revealed perfectly how to love God and how to love our neighbor.

Jesus promised that we would do even greater works than he did. Again, it isn't about the miracles. His works were works of compassion. And through the centuries, with all of its

faults, the church has provided relief to millions who were suffering from disasters, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, worked for fair working conditions, fought for prison reform, and done a multitude of other compassionate acts. This is not to suggest that we can rest on our laurels; there is so much still to be done.

A great American woman, Maya Angelo, died this past week. People will want to do things to honor her memory and her work. A theater or a library named after her would honor her. A restaurant or a race track named after her would not honor who she was and would only be trading and treading on her name for selfish interests. When we pray, saying “in Jesus’ name” at the end is not a magical formula to guarantee that our wishes will be granted. Rather, we should be asking ourselves, is our prayer in alignment with the life and work of Jesus? Is it true to his teaching? Does it honor his name? Are we praying in such a way that his name, his memory, his life, is being honored and his work continued? Are we praying in his way, his life, his path?

The passage from 1 Peter also touches on the issues of doing works and remaining true to Jesus’ name. Peter writes about the process of Christian life saying that we are growing into salvation. We are changing. He uses the metaphor of living stones being built into a spiritual temple. The focus here isn’t on individuals. It’s about what we become together. We grow into salvation together, supporting and encouraging each other, learning from each other, working together to do works that we can’t do alone, mighty works. As living stones, we provide solid support for each other, we are in contact with each other, we are reliably always there for each other. And many stones together can be what individual stones cannot be. We can be a strong source of shelter, of teaching, of feeding, a place of comfort, a body of compassion and Christ’s love.

As a spiritual temple, as a royal priesthood, we can strengthen and embolden each other in those moments when we face individual situations. Many years ago, I had a friend who went to Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City to get a Master’s Degree in mathematics. After graduation, she and her husband came back to Texas. Now, as I recall, Elise was an Episcopalian. After living in an area that was overwhelmingly Mormon, she said that she now had a much greater understanding of what it felt like to be a minority. But the situation of the early Christians was far more extreme than what she had experienced in Salt Lake City.

The early Christian movement was an irritant and a threat to many people who were in positions of responsibility, authority, and leadership. These folks had multiple problems with this fast growing group of followers of Jesus. So far as the Roman administrators such as Pontus Pilate were concerned, calling Jesus the Son of God was usurping a title that belonged to Caesar and therefore was treasonous. For the Jewish temple authorities, declaring that Jesus was divine was blasphemy, because God was one and this sounded to them like adding a second god. To everyone in authority, both Roman and Jewish, a growing group of fervent followers of a condemned and executed criminal looked like nothing less than a boiling pot of unrest and anarchy that disturbed the peace and threatened social stability.

Stephen was one of seven people who had been selected by the church leaders to be dedicated to the compassionate needs of the community so that the leaders could devote their attention to teaching. He was a dynamic and energetic presence in the community. Empowered by all of the living stones around him and inspired by the Holy Spirit, he spoke boldly about his discipleship. That got him noticed, and false accusations were made by some of the people who felt threatened. He was hauled up before the Jerusalem Council where the High Priest questioned him. Stephen launched into an impassioned review of the history of God’s relationship with the Israelites. He ended with the proclamation that Jesus was the anointed righteous one sent by God, and that they were responsible for his death.

Infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, they took him out and stoned him to death. I’ve been trying to imagine how the rest of the church must have felt. How would we feel if one of the elders on the session was beat to death because he or she was a committed Presbyterian? Would

we still come to worship? In that early church, the disciples were living stones, attached to each other, bound together so tightly that it made each one of them stronger and more secure. In the same way, we are called to be living stones built into a spiritual temple, helping each other to withstand the large and small troubles in life.

There are other lessons to be learned from the story of Stephen being stoned to death. One is that a man named Saul was an accomplice to Stephen's death. He watched everyone's cloaks that they removed before they started throwing rocks at Stephen. Later, Saul would be known as Paul, and be the foremost missionary for Christianity to Asia and Greece. Our enemies can become our friends, even our leaders.

Another important lesson in this story is that Stephen asked God to forgive the people throwing the rocks at him, even as he was dying. Jesus famously did the same thing on the cross. We might unconsciously excuse ourselves from following Jesus' example. "Oh, Jesus could forgive because he was divine, but I'm just a flawed and weak human and am incapable of such an impossible thing as forgiving someone who is killing me. But Stephen gives the lie to our excuses because he showed that we _capable of great forgiveness.

Today's texts are rich in lessons to be applied to our lives, but they are all gathered around the core call for us to be bound together in community, encouraging each other, teaching and learning together, and as living stones built into a spiritual temple, doing mighty works as followers of Jesus. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
Honor Christ's name by performing works of love and compassion.
Honor his memory by praying to be like him.
Work together to build yourselves into a spiritual temple
That empowers each of us.
Together we are capable of so much more.