

STONES IN OUR HANDS

APRIL 20, 2008

Today our readings speak of rocks, stones, rejected stones and stones which become the foundation stone. Rocks and stones seem to be there, all around us, inert and silent. We know some stones are deemed precious, others semi-precious and yet others just plain stone.

In the land Jesus walked in his earthly life, stones were a part of the terrain. Fields were stony as were the hillsides, valleys and riverbeds. Stones provided the seats for people listening to this fascinating preacher as well as the stones for those who needed things to throw at the one they disliked or reviled for whatever reason.

Stones by themselves are neutral. Their use changes depending on what we as men and women decide to do with them. Our choice could be profound or it could be profane. As an example of what I mean: we know there is a great difference between picking up a stone to see if it will skip over the water and picking it up to throw at a window or a person in anger.

It is amazing how we as humans utilize stone in so many ways. The architect, the sculptor, the stone mason and the road builder all visualize the stone's utilization from the perspective of their profession. To each of them the stone appears to have different qualities as well as different uses.

Peter's first letter speaks of this differing viewpoint. He states that the very stone the builder had rejected had become the cornerstone. He uses this illustration knowing that everyone regardless of education or profession would understand what he was saying. Here the stone he says rejected by Israel was of course Jesus Christ. Yet this very rejected stone was utilized by God as the foundation stone for his kingdom. Peter's point was that God perceives value very differently for men and women. What we perceived to be worthless and worthy of only throwing out to the gutter, God has claimed as the most worthy stone of all. Jesus, he who was rejected by men and women, is indeed the Son of God and it is he who is the foundation stone of the new kingdom.

Peter was a walking illustration of this very thing. He had always tried so hard to be faithful, to be in all his actions and words a worthy apostle. Yet he himself had denied Jesus on at least three occasions and had often argued about the faith. Yet here was God using him to lead others to Christ. In Peter's mind, he was the stone of no value. However, God saw it otherwise. Be careful, Peter seems to say, do not just wipe off others or judge them unfairly. For all you know, they may be the very person God has chosen for a key particular role. Judge not lest you be judged yourself. As tough we know it is to follow this warning, Peter still urges us to try and try again to be more like the Christ who gave his all for each one of us.

The second reading today relates to the stoning of Stephen, the first documented Christian martyr. We are told this occurred in the presence of Saul of Tarsus, the man we know became Paul, the great teacher and apostle for Christ.

Stephen was one of seven men “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” who at the command of the twelve disciples were chosen by the body of leaders to be set aside specifically to work in social service. They were to care for the widows, the poor and the needy and daily distribute food and other goods for their bodily needs. The apostles had laid their hands on these seven men and given responsibilities and authority to them to use within the Christian community.

Christian leaders throughout the last twenty centuries have stressed the need to maintain a balance between evangelism and social service. We need to care for both the souls and the bodies of those coming to Christ. The United Church of Canada has tried to keep this balance through the years. It is not easy as we have church members who stress either evangelism or social service. The reality, as seen by the early church leaders, is that we need to emphasize both if we are to be honest followers of the Christ who cares for all bodily and spiritual needs of men and women.

Who was this Stephen and what did he do to deserve martyrdom through death by stoning? The writer of the Acts of the Apostles, in the New Testament, says this of Stephen: he was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He was full of grace and power and was a man who did great wonders and signs among people.

We do not know a lot about Stephen before he was set apart for his duties. Where was he from, who led him to Christ, where did he preach and work? Was he originally a Jew or a gentile? Whatever the circumstance before he was chosen, Stephen clearly stood out as a passionate worker and evangelist for Christ.

In the story as told in Acts, Stephen got into a lot of trouble with the Jewish leaders and with the Jews visiting Jerusalem from across the Empire who were disturbed by this new radical faith. You may recall these well known, tough words of Stephen: “You stiff-necked people....you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”

Stiff-necked was used as a metaphor for rebellion and unteachableness, taken from the use of domestic animals for various kinds of work. It is common knowledge that the ox stiffens his neck or turns a stubborn shoulder when offered the yoke. This term had been used in the Old Testament to describe Israel’s rebelliousness against God during the wilderness wandering. A chief characteristic of the stiff-necked was deemed to be the refusal to listen to the word of God delivered through the prophets. In contrast to this stubbornness of Israel, we see God’s wondrous grace.

Suffice to say, in time, leaders in the faith communities, decided they had enough of this man Stephen. They were tired of and angry about his words of condemnation of them as a people. So, he was judged, found guilty of disturbing the people and sentenced to be

stoned to death. This death by stoning was believed to be an appropriate one for it allowed the whole community collectively and individually to participate in the purging the evil out of Israel.

As Palestine is a stony country, pelting with stones was a common expression of mob anger and hatred. Sometimes this led to death. However, the Jewish law sentence for a person to be stoned to death is very deliberate. It allowed for a last minute appearance of new evidence in favour of the condemned or for a confession of the prisoner before death.

There were different methods of stoning. One form had the culprit stripped, and then knocked off a scaffold six cubits high by one witness to his crime. If he survived the fall, the other witness dropped a stone on his chest; if he still lived, all those present picked up stones and hit the man with them until he was pronounced dead.

Another form of stoning took place outside the city itself. The witnesses against the offender placed their hands on the offender's head as if transferring to the criminal the guilt which lay on the whole community for what they were about to do. Then they cast the first stones, followed by the crowd and continued until death had occurred.

And so Stephen died at the hands of people who took up innocent stones off the roadway and with determination and zeal, deliberately chose the act of hurling the stone at the person struggling for life. Men and women used ordinary stones and rocks to vent their anger on the person facing death.

The story of the stoning of Stephen ends with this note: a man named Saul stood by and watched the death of Stephen. Saul the zealous patriot was out to wipe out these heretics who were causing such stress on the ancient faith. However, he was the one who when confronted by God, had to die to his old self and take a new name Paul as he became a follower of Jesus Christ. As he had said often, if Jesus could forgive me, I who had persecuted the Christians and watched Stephen die, then surely he can welcome anyone into the kingdom of believers. With God, all is possible.

You remember I am sure the story of Jesus who came upon a mob who were determined to stone to death a woman they accused of adultery. This was not a state sanctioned stoning but one by a mob stirred up by the rhetoric of others. Jesus stopped them and asked what this was all about. What has she done to deserve this punishment, he asks? They tell him very graphically of their disgust of her actions which they deem totally unacceptable with no forgiveness possible. Remember then what Jesus said to them. He did not call them names or rebuke them for how they felt. Rather he presented this challenge to them:

“Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone.” You may recall I spoke before of the witnesses who accused the person casting the first stone. But here Jesus tries to put in perspective the mobs outrage at the perceived sin of this woman. Ok, go ahead but let the first stone be cast by one of you who is without sin and blameless before God.

Put like this, one by one the crowd melted away, none wanting to be seen as actually believing that they were without sin.

Jesus then asked the woman where her accusers had gone. He quietly urged the woman to go home and sin no more. Jesus was not out to give her a stern lecture. Rather, he knew she was only too aware of what she had done. He gently offered her new life, sent her on her way and encouraged her to reform and grab hold of this unexpected opportunity to lead a new life.

Instead of offering death by stoning, Jesus offered her the possibility of newness of life in all its abundance.

These stories of Jesus we like to read and hear. He was willing to risk all to challenge the old way of doing things. Do not be so quick in picking up those stones in judgment and anger, even righteous anger.

We decide how we want to use stones, the stones we pick up and throw down. There is no life to the stone unless we give it life, for good purposes or for mischief and evil.

The words of Peter, Luke, Paul and others remind us that God gives us the freedom to choose for ourselves how we use the gifts we have received. Ultimately, we are responsible for our response to others and our capacity for good or evil.

Remember, says God, the stone you threw away, is the stone I have made as the cornerstone of my kingdom. In all you do, remember me, your Creator and friend, for I am with you always whatever the circumstance the world throws at you. I will never abandon you, whether in this world or the next.

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