

5th Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020

Rev. Patricia Giannelia, Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church

“Living Stones”

First Reading: Acts 7:55-60

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to serve tables so that the apostles could be free to serve the word (Acts 6:1-6). Stephen does more than distribute food, however. For his preaching of God’s word, he becomes the first martyr of the faith.

⁵⁵Filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

Psalm: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. (Ps. 31:5)

¹In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; let me never be | put to shame;
deliver me | in your righteousness.

²Incline your | ear to me; make haste to de- | liver me.

³Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag | and my
stronghold; for the sake of your name, lead| me and guide me.

⁴Take me out of the net that they have secretly | set for me,
for you are my tow- | er of strength. R

⁵Into your hands I com- | mend my spirit,
for you have redeemed me, O Lord, | God of truth.

¹⁵My times are | in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and
from those who | persecute me.

¹⁶Let your face shine up- | on your servant; save me in yoursteadfast
love.” R

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Christ is the cornerstone of God’s saving work and the foundation of our lives. We are God’s chosen, holy people who continuously celebrate and declare the mercy of God we experience through Jesus Christ.

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But 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. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Gospel: John 14:1-14

On the night that he is to be arrested, Jesus shares final words with his disciples. As the one through whom God is known, he promises to go before them and act on their behalf.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

⁸Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 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 for anything, I will do it.”

This text may sound very familiar to you, as it is one of a list of recommended texts for funerals, and has often been chosen by families for the funeral of a loved one. It fits very well for the context of a peaceful death of a fairly long life. That is the context of most of the funerals we have here, those of you who have attended many of the funerals here have heard it many times.

Jesus repeats similar words later on in Chapter 14: *²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

We have heard this word “troubled” a few times in the Gospel of John: At the death of Lazarus, in chapter 11, and a bit earlier than today’s interchange, at the dinner table, when Jesus reveals that one of the disciples will betray him. A very human Jesus is feeling the very human emotion of being troubled, and yet also reassures the disciples that he will protect them from this, as he recognizes that they are anxious and worried about what the future holds.

Jesus is reassuring the disciples that their eternity is assured, and that he will clear the way for them. *⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.”*

Thomas, forever the practical one, asks the question, “but how?” but why? *“How can we know the way?” asks Thomas...*

Jesus replies, *I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me...*” or in other words...*“Follow me and follow my way of living and you will find the way to God and the way to eternal life.”*

This happens often in the Gospel of John, a kind of knowing and not knowing – Jesus and Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, Maria and Martha at the death of Lazarus, and now Thomas and the other disciples, forever trying to figure it out.

These conversations are not verbal traps set by Jesus for his listeners, but simply a way of showing that we cannot presume to know or define Jesus, for he is much more than all we can ever know or understand. Jesus is not something finite or fixed, but rather someone who wants to be in relationship with us, so more like an ongoing, interchanging conversation.

Jesus reassures the disciples - *“think about it, Thomas...you’ve go this..., what have you learned and lived?”*

“I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the resurrection and the Life, I am the way, and the truth and the life...!”

All of these “I am” sayings describe Jesus, fleshing out this person they have come to know, each “I am” revealing another facet, another depth of meaning, so they can understand him more fully, and how fully he is there for them and how much he wants to remain in relationship with them. As he goes on to say in Chapter 15:

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing....⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

...it doesn’t get much closer than that..

Jesus uses the word “abide” over and over again – elsewhere in John, and many times here. This word, “abide” or “remain”, means more than simply being in the same place as the other. The biblical Greek word for it is “menno”, which literally translated means “to tent together”, “to share tents together...” So close does Jesus want to be with his disciples, that he wants to live with them as one does in a tent – close together, on top of each other, journeying together, seeking safety and good pasture together, so much so

that we come to know one another and about one another...a relationship so close that it endures even when the people involved are physically apart for each other... “I in you and you in me, as I am in the Father and you are in the Father...abide in my love...”

We get a glimpse of this theme in the First Letter of Peter:

*...²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.
⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

That is the call of God, that we should all belong to this spiritual house, as the world needs to see living examples of what it means to live in love. We are called to be “living stones” – active, vibrant, strong and sure for others to seek out....

The writer of 1. Peter goes on to say:

⁹But 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.

¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are chosen, royal, holy...given a place of privilege and honour, not for the purpose of lording it over others, or expecting special treatment, but rather, for the purpose of serving, for with privilege comes commensurate responsibility. In Christ we are freed from our old life-destroying ways in order that we might become free – free to give, free to share, free to love as we have been loved, grace upon grace freely given, freely shared. God is

love and wants us to abide in his love. The voice of God echoes far and wide for us and for all people:

“¹Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. You are my beloved child, I love you and I want you to be with me in these many “menno-ing” places....”

So where in your life do you need healing? Where do you need to hear those divine words of love? To whom would you like to speak them? How can you be a living stone in the world around you?

¹In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness.

²Incline your ear to me; make haste to deliver me.

³Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag and my stronghold; for the sake of your name, lead me and guide me.

What words might you need to hear on this day, perhaps healing words for a past wrong, congratulating words for the hard work you have been doing, encouraging words for the way forward that is so murky...? Especially in these times, where there is so much death around us, so much uncertainty, so few guarantees, we need witness, we need confirmation, affirmation that we are not alone, and that the stones upon which we tread and at time stumble have life in them.

Indeed we are loved and adored by God, and called by God to be living, loving examples of that royal priesthood in a world so much in need of God’s love.

Let us open ourselves to the true love, the deep love, the abiding love that God offers us through Jesus Christ; let us put on that mantle of priesthood and holiness, so that we may become living stones of grace and love building paths and bridges of hope and mercy, so that all may find their way to follow in the way of this divine I AM, and all may share this I AM with others, as we go forth in love. Amen.