

In the epistle this morning we are exhorted (that is what epistles do – they exhort) to come to the Lord as living stones. Living stones. Sit with that for a moment. Living stones. Now the apostle goes on to tell us what to do with our living and stony selves. But perhaps first it would be prudent to wrestle a bit with what a “living stone” might be.

I’m afraid the term, “living stones,” in our culture doesn’t hold much traction, doesn’t seem to have much depth of meaning. If you were to “Google” “living stones” you might likely get Sharon Stone and Oliver Stone, or Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Granted they all are living, but those last two just barely. By comparison in the Bible’s pages “living stone” has great meaning and seems to be almost redundant terms: stones seem always to be associated with life in our Scripture.

Jacob – while fleeing from his angry brother Esau – used a stone as a pillow as he slept in the wilderness. That night Jacob dreamed of angels ascending and descending and transcending between heaven and earth. In this dream God stood beside Jacob and said to him, “Your offspring shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth... Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you.” Jacob used that Posturepedic stone to mark this grace, this assurance that heaven and earth are intimately connected. A living stone of divine presence and promise.

Moses brought the children of Israel from a life of brick-making and life-draining slavery through water to a vast wilderness of stone. Blistered, bedraggled, and thirsting, the people cried out to God in their distress. God brought forth from a stone water that nourished and gave life to the people. In the midst of feelings of abandonment and desolation sustenance was given. A living stone of life.

In faith Moses led the people of Israel to a mountain called Sinai. He didn’t know why. God just told him to do so. Then Moses ascended this stony mount. He didn’t know why. God just told him to do so. There, on the mountain God told Moses to fashion two tablets of stone, upon which the law of God would be composed. These two stones became the sacrament of the covenant, the outward and visible sign of God’s devotion to the people and their devotion to God through the law. These stones they carried with them always, eventually becoming the centerpiece of the “Holy of Holies” in the temple of Jerusalem. Living stones of the covenant of everlasting relationship.

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” So said Simon when Jesus asked the question of all questions, “Who do you say I am.” Jesus, hearing Simon say that he was the Son of God, renamed Simon Peter, “Petrous,” “Rock,” “Stone.” A living stone of proclaiming the true nature of Jesus Christ.

The men surrounded Stephen when they heard a similar proclamation. Stephen could not help but speak the truth of what he experienced of the risen Christ. And the men of that town, they could not bear that truth. With stones they took Stephen’s life, making him the first Christian martyr. These stones bear the sad story – as old as humankind – of our hearts of stone, of fear and violence and hatred. Tragic living stones of our separation from God’s love.

Earlier before Stephen met his fate, in the gospel narrative, other men had gathered with stones in their hands. They surround a woman who is bruised and battered. They have to be there equipped with death. The law requires it. She has sinned. She has committed adultery. They have to do it. Jesus stands in their midst beside this woman – just as God stood beside Jacob, bending down, and begins writing in the dust of their lives, the dust of the rock and stone in which they live, saying “Very well. Do what you must. But first, let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” First one, then another, then a chorus of thuds are heard as

each of the men loosen and drop the stone he holds to the ground by his side. This is the thudding sound of redemption and mercy and reconciliation. Living stones of forgiveness and healing and new life for all.

Then there is the stone that just would not stay still. This stone was rolled to seal up the death of incarnate God. This stone was to mark the death of all that came before, the death of all living stones. And yet this was not meant to be. This tomb stone could not stay still. This stone was rolled back to signify the death of death forever. "Christ is alive!" this stone sings! A living stone of God's promise of everlasting life for all God's children.

When we are exhorted to come to the Lord as living stones these are the stones that we are to be: dream stones of divine presence, stones of life-giving sustenance, stones of covenantal relationship, stones proclaiming Jesus as God, stones of self-giving devotion, stones of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing, stones singing everlasting life for all. And what are we to do with our living and stony selves? Are we to surround and destroy? Are we to build walls that separate and divide? Are we to exist in scattered disarray, casting a living shadow only upon the ground upon which we stand? No, the apostle tells us that we are to come together as a temple, to be built into a spiritual house.

Now in my line of work I frequently hear, "I find God on the golf course. I find God on the lake. I don't need church." And while I would acknowledge the truth of the first two statements I would contend that we do need communities of faith. Our world needs spiritual homes, communions of living stones...

Have you ever watched the TV show, "The Dog Whisperer?" I love it, and I love Cesar Millan, the self-proclaimed "Dog Whisperer." Cesar Millan consults with dog owners about the difficulties they have with their canine companions. Some of these challenges are mild. Some are absolutely bizarre. And some are downright frightening. Upon occasion Cesar is called in to help with a situation where a dog has become increasingly aggressive, frightened of and attacking any person or any dog they might encounter. In most cases these dogs are deemed irredeemable. They are losers. They are lost causes. They just need to be put down. But Cesar comes anyway. And among these fear-driven dogs there are some whom Cesar cannot reach. They don't respond to his whispering. You know what Cesar does? He does something counter-intuitive. He introduces these most aggressive and fearful dogs to his pack. It turns out that the Dog Whisperer has a pack of 35-40 dogs at his home. They are – in his words – "calm, balanced, and submissive" dogs. The first time I saw this happen I thought, "Oh, no, this is going to be "Wild Kingdom:" the out-of-control-man-and-dog-eater would tear these calm and submissive dogs apart. But actually something altogether different happens. When the fear-filled aggressive dog is introduced the pack does not take into themselves any of the aggressive dog's fear or behavior. They simply accept and receive the newcomer. In that act the hopeless dog that is transformed. No dog barks. No one snarls. No one shows teeth. The pack does not pin down the outsider to dominate him or her. The out-of-control dog just sees there is a different way of being, and he or she immediately succumbs to this new way. It is incredible to see this frenzied animal simply lie down among all these dogs, panting and calm. It's almost as if the dog says, "Whew. At last. I don't have to be like that anymore. Thank God. Thank God." After being in that environment for a week or so the "pathologic" dog is able to return to its home, changed forever. It literally has new life. And perhaps the most important and interesting part of all this is the pack itself. Cesar Millan did not go hunting all over the country for dogs that were naturally calm and submissive. Eighty to ninety percent of them are pit bulls, and they all come from checkered pasts. Each is a

loser, a social reject, a lost cause, that has been abandoned by its owner and the world. Each has experienced the transformation they share.

Sound familiar? To come together as living stones is to create a spiritual home that is much like Cesar's pack. May God continue to give us the grace to bring together our living and stony selves, each of us embodiments of divine presence, of divine sustenance, of thanksgiving, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of covenantal love and everlasting life. May we create as a community // a divine temple, a spiritual house, where aggression is not absorbed but deflected with love. May we build a living space where what tears down is transformed into what builds up. May we strive to construct a holy home where the worn down and abandoned fear-biters of our world (acknowledging that at times that may be us!) may find acceptance as beloved children of God. May we bring ourselves together as living stones such that all who come through these doors may find a resting place, where they can just lie down, panting, and say, "Whew. At last. I don't have to be like that anymore. Thank God. Thank God."