

Throwing Rocks or Laying Stones?

Bill Bartley is amazing. We had a clog in our upstairs toilet over home, which no amount of plunging would solve. I called Bill and Bill came. It was obvious that Bill knew exactly what he was doing. He shoved a plumbing snake down the toilet, gave it a quick twist and brought the problem up to the surface. A section of our toilet brush had rusted loose from the handle and had been flushed but it didn't make it past the first elbow in the pipe. It stayed there collecting toilet paper and clogging up the system. Bill the liberator, rescued the piece of brush and freed the clog. Everything is now running smoothly, better than ever. It reminds me of a sign I used to see at a septic tank cleaning business on the road to Church Camp: It said, "a straight flush beats a full house!"

This has almost nothing to do with what I want to share with you in today's sermon--only to say this: We need to watch out what we allow to get stuck in our craws, anything we allow to stick is likely to latch on to other things and stop up our whole systems. If we hang on to things we shouldn't hang on to, it's amazing what horrible things can come spewing out of our minds and eventually out of our mouths as well. That's why Paul says, in Ephesians 4:26-27, "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." If we give the devil even an inch he will take a mile every time. The writer of Proverbs puts it this way in Proverbs 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." We need to watch what we allow to lodge in our craws and in our hearts.

After clearing my pipes, and after a short visit, I followed Bill out to my driveway at which point Bill commented on the stones covering the walls of the little addition I had put on my house a number of years ago. Back then, Bill had told me where I could get the stones for free and I had taken his advice. Bill noted that the stone walls still looked good, and I enjoyed his compliment.

Observing the stone wall also got me to thinking about stones. There's a lot of talk about stones in the Bible. The Holy Land is strewn with many stones which are used for many things. In the Bible stones are used to build buildings and to kill people, both bad and good. Goliath the Philistine giant was slain with a stone and Stephen, the first Christian martyr was killed with stones. Paul was stoned but survived. Stones were sometimes piled up as memorials in places where people had

2

encountered the presence of God. Stones were used to build fences and to knock other fences down. Stones were used as weights to measure grain and other commodities. Stones were used to make wheels and to mark property lines. Stones were used as mill stones and to seal tombs. The devil used stones in a futile attempt to cause Jesus to sin; when Jesus was hungry the devil said, "If you are the Son of God, why not turn these stones into bread?" Jesus and His apostles often used stones symbolically in their preaching and teaching. They talked about stony hearts, rock solid faith and foundations, and spiritual buildings made of living stones. I am very sure that a complete study of all the stones and references to stone in the Bible would yield many powerful lessons and there isn't time for this this morning; I do, however, want to mention two.

The first has to do with the passage in John 8 where John tells us that a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus to test Him. John 8:1-11 say:

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

The time of day in this story is significant. It was at dawn. No doubt those who had caught the woman in the act of adultery had documented her unlawful meeting with a man who was somebody else's husband. They had seen her enter his house or more likely the room in the inn or among a secluded stand of trees where the tryst occurred. They were waiting for her when

3

she left the house or the inn or the trees in the morning. Or, perhaps, they had stormed the room or the place and dragged her out still naked.

The trap they thought they had laid for Jesus was cleverly constructed. They made sure that their evidence was solid and fresh. Their reference in the Law was clear. And the fact that Jesus was known to befriend people of questionable character made the plan perfect. They meant to trap Jesus between the clear teaching of the Law, on the one hand, and His compassion for His friends, on the other hand. Either way they meant to accuse Him or to humiliate Him. The fact that it was only the woman of the affair that they had captured and presented for judgment only made things easier for them. Women, especially poor Jewish women, had little standing in the culture; almost no one would raise an eyebrow if they managed to have her killed. I imagine that the accusers had already picked up stones ready to participate in the execution.

It is also possible that the Pharisees were attempting to trap Jesus between the Jewish law and the Roman law to which the Jews were now being forced to submit. Roman law reserved the death penalty for itself. If Jesus commanded that the woman be stoned, he would be in violation of Roman law and if He refused to stone her, he would be in violation of Jewish law. It was a pretty neat setup. They figured to have Jesus between a rock and a hard place. Their confidence must have swelled when Jesus at first gave no answer and began to doodle in the dirt. They must have been thinking "He doesn't know what to say; we have Him this time. We finally have Him."

But Jesus wasn't playing in the dirt. Jesus was communing with His Father. He was gathering the presence and focusing the power of the Holy Spirit. And when He stood to speak it was His accusers who were speechless. He put the matter back into their laps. "He who is without sin; let him cast the first stone." So simple and yet so profound. That pebble of truth thrown into the pond at Jerusalem made a wave that washes down through history, reaching all the way down to us. When we are so sure of our ground and our legal right and when we find ourselves anxious to pass judgment on another to justify ourselves, these words of Jesus come up to block our path. They also remind us of other words of Jesus: Something about taking the log out of our own eye before we seek to extract a splinter from the eye of our sister, from the eye of our brother. Jesus strongly warns us

not to judge because the likelihood of us being able to judge justly is nil. He tells us that by the standards we use to judge others, we ourselves will be judged. He instructs us to pray, "Father, forgive us our trespasses and debts the way we forgive those who trespass and incur debts against us." He who is without sin, she who is already perfect, let them cast the first stone. Suddenly in our imaginations we hear the sound of stones dropping to the ground and we can see little dust clouds rising from where each stone hits the dirt. The accusers of the woman caught in adultery fade away in shame, their escape hidden by the dust. For all who have ears to hear: "He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone."

The other passage about stones that I want to reference this morning is found in I Peter, whose name also means "stone." I Peter 2:1-5 say,

"Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

First notice what Peter instructs us to get rid of, to get out of our pipes: "rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." Flush it out before the Lord. Get someone else to pray for us or with us. Get counseling. We must do whatever we have to do to get unclogged. And then, secondly, in place of the evil stuff that would give the devil a foothold, we need to crave pure spiritual milk. We need to seek and drink in the holy love of God until we are mature in our faith and able to love others, even and especially those who would otherwise rub us the wrong way.

Finally notice I Peter 2:4-5, "As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." When I was siding my addition with stones, these were real stones, dug fresh from the earth. No two stones were the same. And, in order to get them to fit on my walls I had to spread them out on the ground and get a good

look at what I had. Then I had to look at each one carefully and see how the contours and colors of one stone would fit with the other stones already cemented in place. Sometimes I had to take my stone chisel and hammer and chip a little off here or there to make them fit, but basically I worked with what I had and discovered that each stone was important to the project. True, I had a few stones left over at the end, which I used as a border around my little garden pond, but even at that every stone was important and every stone had something to contribute. And, when it was all said and done, I was very pleased with how each stone, whether big or small, rather symmetrical or oddly shaped, colorful or plain, fit with the others and made it's own contribution. I must also say that, in the end, not one stone was more important than the other, but each was precious and was essential to the beauty and stability of the whole.

Peter tells us together as believers in God's church we are like living stones. And, although some of the children sometimes get me and Bob Thompson confused, no two of us are exactly alike. Bob's taller than I am, he has more hair, and I can't laugh like Bob laughs. We come in all shapes and sizes, all with different gifts and abilities, and with unique personalities and ways of understanding the Lord and His calling in our lives. And it is true that some of us fit in more naturally and more easily with some people than with others. It's a fact of life. But the thing I want us to take home with us today is this: God is the builder of His house and God has brought us together for a purpose and if we will allow Him to put us together in His spiritual house the way He wants to put us together, the end result will be beautiful and quite spectacular. Everyone will have a place and everyone will be essential and no one will be more important than any other. Each living stone is created by God, is loved by God, and bears the image of God. And, if we trust God and love God, we must also love and learn to trust one another. I John 4:20 says, "If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." Beloved, let us love and trust our God and let us love and learn to trust one another.

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John 8:1-11; I Peter 2:1-5

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