

Sermon: Stones in the Wall

Scripture: I Peter 2:2-10

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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Thank you John and Jennifer for reading a portion of that letter from Peter...well, some scholars believe it's directly from the hand of Peter, Jesus' disciple himself, and other scholars believe it came from a later school of those who followed Peter and his particular teachings about the faith.

There were legends that quickly arose about Peter in early Christianity which are not in our Bible, but interesting nonetheless. One story about the end of Peter's life tells that there were persecutions of Christians breaking out in Rome and Peter was escaping out of the city and met Jesus (or a vision of Jesus) walking toward Rome on the Appian Way as Peter was hightailing it out. Peter asked "Where are you going, Lord?" Jesus responded "into the city to be crucified again." Shamed by the vision, the story says, Peter returned to Rome, faced imprisonment and eventual death, which was by crucifixion upside down at his own insistence because he didn't believe he was worthy to die in the same way as his Lord.

This letter of I Peter, written by Peter or not, is clearly in a time of persecution for Christians and Peter is encouraging the faithful to remain strong and courageous and virtuous amidst all the strife that the community is experiencing, the sufferings, deaths and fear surrounding it all. I won't go into the gruesome details of Roman persecution of Christians under Nero and Trajan but suffice it to say that Rome under those leaders did NOT abide anyone giving ultimate allegiance and devotion to anything but the Emperor and the gods who established his reign. It made being an early Christian a harrowing proposition, really only for those inflamed with passion for the Lord!

To be honest, I've wondered at times how appropriate it is for us in our comfortable settings of church in 21st century America where being a Christian doesn't usually involve a harrowing life-threatening commitment to Christ, I've wondered how appropriate it is for us to even try to apply scriptures like 1 Peter to our own context. The early Christians who received this letter were under severe assault for what they believed. And the church leaders like Peter had to encourage them to endure, so when Peter speaks to them about being living stones built into a temple or a spiritual house for God, that they are a chosen priesthood and a holy nation called to reveal God's truth and love to the world, he was reminding them of their high purpose and their high calling for which the current sufferings and struggles were inconsequential compared to the call given them and the task set before them. There was no institution at the time, no buildings and infrastructure to their religion, in fact it really wasn't a religion per se at the time, but a message carried in the way they lived and who they were and how they impacted others – "they will know we are Christians by our love by our love" was the heart of it. Known by their love, even as they were being persecuted.

But I do think in our current situation of physical separation and quarantine, we come slightly closer to being able to identify with what the faithful were experiencing. Like the Roman powers enemies around us abound. Choose your enemy. Some of us might see the virus as the enemy persecuting us. Others of us see China or Russia or our own government as the enemy. Some of us see massive corporations as the enemy, especially giant tech companies who have a hold over our lives more than ever since we are more online than ever. For some it's a combination of these that is the persecuting enemy keeping us under control and blinded by keeping us entertained and comfortably numb, to quote Pink Floyd... "Hello, hello, hello? Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me! Is there anyone at home?" For others, the enemy is the structures of our society that

entitle some because of their white race or male gender or wealth and social class while imprisoning and handicapping disproportionately people of color and people in poverty. And for still others, the enemies are the immigrants and the challengers of the status quo and the minorities who are taking over from their perspective. And so on and so forth. You know what I mean, I'm just saying in this moment we are feeling particularly vulnerable and so enemies abound!

So then what does it mean in this context, in this setting of 21st century America in the midst of a pandemic and a crashing economy for us Christians to hear 1st century Peter in the midst of Roman persecution refer to followers of Jesus as “living stones built into a spiritual house”? We do not have the luxury of thinking of ourselves right now... or maybe anymore... as simply the building on the hill in Winchester. It's not ultimately who we are as church. It's clear, now that we have not been able to darken these doors for over 6 weeks, that we are still church together outside of those stones. Instead, we are living stones of the spiritual house that is the body of Christ, the First Congregational Church of Winchester, that you and me here or wherever trying together to maintain Christian love, truth, and faithfulness in the midst of anything and everything that diminishes love, truth and faithfulness. What are we to do in the face of our enemies, real or perceived? For they are to know us by our love, not our fury, by our mercy not judgments, by our faith not our fear.

Of course it can be problematic to frame things in terms of the good and the bad, friends and enemies, but it's also true that it simply isn't “all good” like that popular phrase suggest – “It's all good” – Cause a black man being shot while jogging through a neighborhood is not good? People falling into poverty because of a devastated economy is not good? I don't think any of us in our right minds would say that or think that any of that is “all good”. It's not all good, some of it is really bad and can be made better and our capacity to make things better is one of

our gifts granted us by a creative God who invites us to be co-creators of a better world.

That being said, we probably do need to get clear with one another on where the areas are exactly that need our efforts, our commitment, our energy, our love, as a spiritual house that we have been built into in order to make our world a better place. Because the enemy is not crucifying us in the public square, I think we are a little more challenged to understand what it might mean to remain faithful and strong proclaiming God's mighty acts in this world over and against those who would have us devoted to something less than God. And let us not be fooled that even here in America, the land of the free, there are Neros and Trajans aplenty in power who expect us to bow to them or suffer the consequences.

So then, if that is true, that from our societies perspective, from the powers that be that... "all and all you're just another brick in the wall", since I'm on Pink Floyd, how do we hear this scripture from I Peter anew which says, no you are not just another brick in a wall but you are living stones, as followers of Jesus, built into a grace-filled spiritual home for the sake of the world that God so loves? So I leave you with that question as we turn to a time of prayer, just for a moment of silence – Church, what does it mean to be living stones, God's spiritual home for a world in need of God's mercy and love?

Welcome and Call to Worship

Good morning everyone and welcome to worship in the church of First Congregational Winchester and yes we are in church and at church and being church even as we gather remotely from our homes! We hope you are all well and we just remind you to let us in the Ministry Team know if you are not well in any way so that we can support you.

The quarantine and social isolation is wearing on us all and so not being well can look physical but also emotional, spiritual, financial, you name it. But we as a church can support one another through it... if we know about one another's needs. So don't hesitate.

So we are worshipping together by zoom this morning and then we'll immediately transition at the end of this service into our 180th Annual Meeting. We count on closer members and friends sticking around for it, it'll be on this same conference call, and while anyone else is welcome we understand that some of you will choose to exit at the end of worship and that's fine too.

I bring us this morning with the words of Rev. Steven Charleston in his devotional book "Cloud Walking" where he says:

"God's grace offers this hour as though it were a single jewel to be threaded through the necklace of time. This hour is made precious, a gift meant just for you, that takes the earthy edges of hard stone and polishes them to shine with the inner light of your own spirit. This hour then is not heavy-footed time marching thoughtlessly through shadows, but a sparkling chance given to discover hints of heaven in every waking moment."

May our time of worship together grant you some hint of heaven in this blessed waking moment. Let us worship together!

Sing with me "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" as it should appear on your screens...