

“Stability”

Sermon at First Congregational Church, May 7, 2023

There is a sweetness to both the psalm and to this New Testament letter. I discovered that sweetness by reading the whole letter of first Peter. I discovered a letter written to a class of people who most likely did not have power. I heard Peter offering them a vision of enduring strength meant to give them the power to keep on going, to endure and even to thrive.

And then I listened to Eugene Peterson’s language. I went through the passage like a beach comber, finding the words that just stood out to me. And I pieced together this little poem drawn from his words.

**chosen chosen chosen
nothing to something**

**welcome
in the place of honor
vibrant**

**a taste
at the breast of
of God**

drink deep

I hope I am intriguing you with themes that might capture your heart and mind in this ancient letter.

**chosen chosen chosen
nothing to something**

welcome
in the place of honor
vibrant

a taste
at the breast of
of God

drink deep

My question for this morning is what does it mean, today, to be a living stone... to capture Peter's image. Not just to be strong ... but to be something more, a source of life, a bridge to God and the life we discover in community?

Peter calls Jesus the original stone, the stone alive for all, the cornerstone, the living stone. His cut, his shape has given the building its strong lines and held it true. Without him the building would be insecure, uneven, uninhabitable.

Jesus' strength lay in the way in which he read the ancient Jewish Torah. Jesus got up in the temple and found a text at the end of the book of Isaiah. He read the text aloud as a way of giving meaning to his call. "The spirit of God is upon me, giving power to heal, release, and forgive." Other reformers of Jesus day also read the Torah. They emphasized the adherence, often the strict adherence, to the Jewish law. But Jesus seemed to see something else... that the arc of God in the world was to release, redeem, and restore. He believed that God was in the world to love the creation, and all its inhabitants. Jesus was a living stone because he found a life-giving vision in the Scriptures that he read and taught. His vision was not about

permanence, structure and control. His vision was about stability and restoration.

Simon had been chosen and renamed by Jesus, Peter. This nickname was translated, interestingly, as the word “rock”! But Peter, in spite of that name, was often insecure. He was, indeed, the master of the great bellyflop, someone who, like it, or not, failed in big ways. Blustery, impulsive, a big character with a big heart, Peter said things that he later regretted ... did things that made him blush ... and found himself on the wrong side of issues quite often.

Peter was not just a flop, he had trouble being ‘right sized’. Inflated on the one hand, deflated and discouraged on the other, his floppiness was about having trouble with knowing himself and the love of God in his life.

And yet... there was a bridge of life between Jesus, his friend and Peter the flop. Not only did Jesus love him there, but he found in Peter a bridge building partner.

For instance, one day, Peter fell into deep sleep. He had a powerful, provocative dream ... God’s voice said to him ‘rise Peter, and feast on all of creation without distinction!’ In other words don’t be constrained by Jewish laws of what is clean, and what is unclean. The dream was repeated and a very troubled Peter heard a knocking on his door. He opened that door and found a group asking him to come to a Gentile home to proclaim his message. Here is where Peter became a living stone. He felt the urging to say yes. Almost unwittingly Peter became a bridge for God’s life to someone he would otherwise never have met or shared a meal with. Peter at that moment was a living stone, building a living bridge to a new place in God’s creation.

Here is how life comes through to me here! Jesus surrounded Peter and his mistakes and never gave up on him. And in that new life he invited Peter to also create new opportunities. Through Peter the life of God was blessed and broken open into the world. And here Peter takes his nickname ROCK ... the name Jesus gave him uniquely ... and shares it with any who would follow. YOU ARE ALL LIVING STONES... he says! You are all invited to be a bridge of life to a new part of God's world.

In Peters time, the faithful who we presume had very little in the world, were strengthened by the thought they were alive and were stones of strength in a great building of faith. Today, we who have much, are being invited again to view our faith as a place for life to bubble up. A place where permanence is replaced by a deeper and more faithful stability.

I have been reading a book about dementia from a Christian perspective, written by a man named John Swinton. One of the deep questions he wrestles with is, are we still fully human when we have lost our memory? And yet he reminds us that one of the essential categories for understanding of our lives is that we are vulnerable, contingent on God's love, holding ourselves open to grace. He says we would no more question whether a baby is human even if their powers are very very limited then we might question an older member of our community whose powers are waning, whose memory is going... or gone. Are they not still contingent within God's love, resting on God's strength?

This is our vision of stability.

Our hearts yearn for permanence and yet are given impermanence and yet stability in God's love. This is where life happens. This is what the psalm today refers to. The setting of this song is the restless

yearning of a younger David in the wilderness on foot pursued by enemies. He will call on God as the true rock... A rock that cannot be seen, but can be felt. God about whom we tell stories of ordinary love, the miracle of the created world, and the interventions that bring healing, especially as we lift our hands open to God.

The title of this sermon refers to the great church leader Benedict of Nursia. If you know the many monastic orders, his early order was established in the sixth century and continues on today, fifteen hundred years later. He asked the monks in his community to adopt several vows. One of these was the great vow of stability. The monks were to commit to this community for life, allowing the community to be a place where their own rough edges were worked on. Kathleen Norris, observing this community in our time has this to say. She notes that stability is a matter of the heart, worked on by being close to one another in a single community. The members of the community were to be living stones, imparting the life given them by God to each other and to the world.

Peter struggled to be right sized, to be available to the community and to what God was doing that was new and fresh and life giving.

Here are several marks of being right sized and available to God.

Let's return to the poetry of this passage...

chosen chosen chosen
nothing to something

When we present our work we take pride in our responsibility... but we don't feed the ego, the hungry self. We remember that our work flows out of the love of God.

Please pardon the homeliest of illustrations and forgive the comparison. But we have a 35 pound aussie mix. And when we are preparing dinner, he settles down on the mat by the sink and rests his muzzle on his paws. He is like the little boy who stands and stares at his shoe laces and hopes for things he feels he cannot ask for. But he is quiet because he knows that something good will eventually come.

This is security. And the image of being chosen by God always breathes this power into our hearts. You are enough and there is enough love to go around.

**welcome
in the place of honor
vibrant**

There are so many ways to speak to this welcome, even as we have talked about the powerful message of the book of Ruth... the outsider who acted into a powerful welcome from God. On an annual meeting day, when the workings of the church are revealed, we again remember that everyone is reflected in the work of the church, no matter how recently they have come to sit at the table.

Honor is not something earned. It is the gift of this table, the gift of Jesus' life, the gift of this community.

**a taste
at the breast of
of God**

drink deep

We have a first grand baby and I have two images of little Arthur. In one he is dressed in a Celtics onesy looking out at the camera with an appraising eye. But the other is of his sleeping face... the very image

of trust. Love is honored as we let God hold us and hold us and hold us.

We cultivate stability through resting in the love of God and the trusting love of our community. Cultivate stability of heart today. Rest in God's love as you do the work you are given.

Psalm 131 takes my image of little Arthur one important step further.

¹ O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.

² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;

my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.^{1a} O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.

Peter right sized. Resting comfortably in his own gifts, abilities and strengths. Sharing his nick name. Generous in spirit. Settled in God. Ready for life and for action. Amen.