

2 Peter 2: 1-10
John 14: 1-14
May 14, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

When Peter wrote this letter the great stones of the temple in Jerusalem were cold. They were scattered. No one came to offer sacrifices there. Indeed most of the people who had lived in Jerusalem had now moved away to other towns in Palestine. Many had gone even farther away. The reason for this was that the Romans had had enough of the civil unrest and rebellion generated by religious fanatics. They reasoned rightly that to destroy the temple and the worship of the god of that temple would destroy the soul of the city and would end the religion based rebellion. It was the same reasoning that led the Babylonians to destroy the first temple.

God knows that there is ample evidence for the belief that religion is responsible for brutality and violence rather than compassion and hope. Extremists of all religions make the news every day for acts of atrocity all in the name of the god of their religion. And as the human story equally demonstrates, religions have participated in atrocity as much by silence as active terrorism. We have only to remember the silence of Christian churches as Hitler gained power, our silence at the rounding up of Jews and the infirm of mind and body. A cartoon captures this attitude. God and an angel are on a cloud seeing the smoke and flame of a bomb rising into the sky. In the caption God says, "You're right. Next time no religion."

Yet any fair reading of history shows that it is not religion that is responsible for violence and terrorism. It is human arrogance and self-righteousness. It is the belief in the absolute rightness of a point of view that justifies any means to gain a particular goal. Obviously, the fast

track to justifying violence and terrorism is act in the name of God. There is always ample justification in any religious text to seem to endorse crusades, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, racism, sexism, homophobia and any other deviation from a strict moral and theological code. When the experience of the mysterious power of creativity, generosity and compassion which is the soul of religious faith is suppressed in favor of strict codes of belief and practice religion becomes, frankly, evil. Yet the same is true of any organized system of thought. The genocidal murder of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia and Mao Tse Tung's China make religious brutality seem almost human. It is the belief that we are absolutely right when combined with absolute power which is responsible. Religion is the excuse. Religion is the justification. But real religion is not the source. Human blindness and misuse of power is the source.

That is why Peter holds before the churches dispersed around the Roman Empire the image of stones. He wants them to be reminded that Jesus predicted that the very stones which the disciples so admired would be destroyed. "Not one stone would be left upon the other. So Peter warns the people who would gather to hear the letter not to make the same mistake. "Get rid of all malice and all guile, insincerity, envy and all slander." Peter knows that these inner qualities are expressions of one root—self-centered life. They are the signs of a life that is only thinking of "what is good for me and mine." It is the ugly interior life of those who resent that others have more than they do and who resent the good fortune of others and seek to bring them down to their level. Peter recognizes the terrible corrosive power of these inner thoughts and feelings. He has seen first-hand how they conspired to kill Jesus. He has seen how people will rally around leaders who feed on their jealousy, anger and fear and lead them to do horrible things.

Instead, Peter says, “adopt the spiritual attitude of children who are dependent on their mother’s milk to seek that nourishment above all things. Recognize that all else is temporary and ultimately unhealthy.

In stark contrast to the cold scattered stones of the temple in Jerusalem Peter exhorts his hearers to “Come to Jesus, a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and *like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...*”

Clearly Peter is speaking with images. Instead of identifying religious faith with a building, followers of Jesus must become living evidence of the presence of the Risen Christ. The community of faith is an association of people made alive by the chosen living stone of Jesus dead on the cross and alive in the power of God. From this Living Stone comes the animating power God’s compassion and merciful love.

Notice too, that Peter does *not* say, “Make your selves living stones.” Instead he says, “...as living stones, *let yourselves be built* into a spiritual house.” The passive voice is critical here. We do not grow spiritually by our own power. We grow by allowing the power of God’s grace in Jesus to work in us and through us. The growth in the Holy Spirit has much more to do with letting go of our demand to have life on our own terms and allowing God to direct our days. In the well-known phrase it is about “letting go and letting God.” Becoming living spiritual stones is about the daily walk of little relinquishments—of putting the life of Jesus first—opening the door for someone, letting someone into traffic, letting go of our anger when someone gets in ahead of us and seeing how our lives can be of service to others. The spiritual life is a life-long journey of allowing God to make our material bodies into living breathing

spiritual building blocks of God's kingdom—one day at a time, one prayer at a time, one letting go and letting God at a time.

It is in this context that I ask you to hear John's quoting of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Like many of you I shy away from this text because it seems so exclusionary and limiting. The other reason I am uncomfortable with the phrase is that it so often is interpreted through the lens of doctrinal belief. So, I have been warned that if I do not believe that Jesus is the one and only way to salvation and that all other paths lead to eternal torment, I am headed to eternal torment myself.

Yet two things are true for me. In my life, *Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is my way to the Father.* I did not seek Jesus out. He sought me. I did not come to Jesus by believing anything. He reached out his hand to save me from my own destruction. As a result I have followed him—very imperfectly ever since. I have responded to Peter's beckoning invitation to "come to him, the living stone." It is all I can say to you. To get involved in heady intellectual debates about whether or not people can be led to God apart from Jesus is, for me, a useless and futile endeavor. What I can say is that this path leads me to the Father. I can only speak about my experience of God transforming my life in Jesus.

My exhortation to you this morning is to claim Jesus path for your own. Choose him to be for yourselves the way the truth and the life. Don't stand by afraid to commit to him because other people follow other paths. Dare to give your life and death to him who is for us the living stone and together let us allow ourselves to be built into a vibrant and shimmering spiritual house. Amen.