

“Stones”

A homily by Stephen Martz for the people of St. Nicholas

20 April 2008

The Fifth Sunday After Easter

Acts 7:55-60 + Psalm 31 + 1 Peter 2:1-10 + John 14:1-14

Okay, so whose idea was it anyway for me, a Stephen, to preach on the Sunday Stephen gets stoned to death? To tell the truth, it was mine, only I didn't realize the story was part of the deal. It didn't use to be, but times change. So I'm stuck – and ready to duck.

All the more because by now you will have noticed there are lots of stones spread throughout the church this morning. Big stones. Heavy rocks. Like the stones that killed Stephen, perhaps. Feel free to pick them up, handle them.

As you do, let's look at two stories. First, the story whose end we heard a few minutes ago. Stephen was a Jew who became a follower of Jesus at the time Christianity was emerging from the womb of Judaism. Religion being religion, there was a lot of conflict going on.

The quarrel that drives Stephen's story was a clash between Jewish Christians like Stephen who were not from Jerusalem – Hellenists -- and others who were longtime residents of the holy city – Hebrews. The Hellenists felt the Hebrews neglected the needs of Hellenist widows and favored needy Hebrews.

The two groups squabbled so ferociously that community life suffered and the apostles were forced to make an early foray into the nascent field of conflict management. Their solution was to appoint Stephen and six others to oversee care

of the needy, upon which they congratulated themselves, and went back to proclaiming the word of God.

This worked – for a time. The apostles preached powerfully, the deacons cared lovingly for Hellenists and Hebrews alike, and the community grew. But Stephen, apparently a charismatic man, continued to evoke envy, and eventually his foes upped the ante by complaining to the Jewish council about his ideas.

Stephen responded with an eloquent and spirited defense of the new faith. But he was anything but politic, lambasting his elders in the faith, the council. We heard the result.

The next story I'd like to share is an Inuit tale retold by the Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes. There was a boy in a village who was so hungry that the other villagers tied him to a rope lest he eat them as they came and went for the hunt.

His parents had been killed by bears and he had been left all alone. The only thing that remained of his parents was a large stone, about the size of the boy, outside their hut. The child was wracked by physical hunger, to be sure, but he also felt the soul hunger of a motherless child, a hunger too deep for words.

He was an outcast, spurned and ridiculed by the others. His grief was so great that today we'd give him a psychiatric diagnosis and medicate him heavily. But the other villagers just threw him some rancid reindeer meat every now and then, and taunted him for his peculiar ways.

He grew more and more hungry, more and more lonely. He was filled with a longing for he knew not what and gripped by overwhelming despair. And in the midst of all that, he began to stretch his rope until one day he finally could reach the rock, and he threw his arms around it and held on.

The villagers taunted him all the more. Slowly, the stone began to absorb the warmth from his body and the boy began to die. His people jeered all the more, and great icy tears began to roll down his face. His cold tears hit the hot rock and split it right in two.

And inside the rock, there was a most perfect young girl and she said to him, “I’m here now. Come, let’s go. You are an orphan no more.” And she gave him a bow, and arrows, and off they went to hunt and eat and laugh and live together and have babies together. And they were happy.

Two stories, two very different understandings of rocks. We might say one represents a more “masculine” understanding, the other a more “feminine” one. (I use those terms in their Jungian sense and do not see them as gender specific. We are all, whatever our age, orientation, or gender, a mix of “masculine” and “feminine.”)

In the “masculine” appropriation, stones frequently serve as weapons to enforce the law, and set the boundaries of the community. Stephen is executed for transgressing the boundaries of his community – the agreed-upon norms that define who belongs and who does not. Stones were also used to defend or to liberate. Think of David and the five stones he used to slay Goliath. Boundary-setting is not necessarily negative.

The “masculine” relationship to stones emphasizes their weight, solidity and permanence, and it is not surprising that rocks become a metaphor for the divine or the divinely empowered. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Yahweh – God – is seen variously as the *rock of Israel* (2 Samuel 23:3, Isaiah 30:29), an *everlasting rock* (Isaiah 26:4), and the *rock of deliverance* (Psalms 62, 89, 95),

In the Christian Testament the two most memorable invocations of the image are Jesus, the stone the builders rejected (*Psalms 118*), as the cornerstone of true faith and Peter, leader of the apostles, as *rock*.

The “feminine” understanding of stones is less well-known, and perhaps more interesting because of this. The warm rock of the Inuit tale leads us into a wholly different stone symbolism. Old European traditions associate rocks and stones with the “bones of mother earth” and with fertility.

We hear echoes of this in Peter’s call to the early Christians to become “living stones.” In this “feminine” interpretation of the image, rocks are not weapons, but are alive and maternal, an eternal carrier of love and warmth. In many places, ancient dolmens were known as “hot stones” and said to transmit fertility to women who sat on them.



There are traces of a “feminine” symbolic meaning elsewhere in the Bible. Besides the reference to living stones in 1 Peter, the Book of Deuteronomy speaks of God as *the rock who bore Israel*.

*You [Israel] were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;
you forgot the God that gave you birth.*

(Deuteronomy 32:18)

Little did we know the Deuteronomist was a feminist! But he nailed it. We who live and move and have our being in patriarchal religions -- including our beloved Christianity -- we *have* forgotten Mother Earth, the Goddess, the “feminine” understanding of rocks and stones.

In “feminine” form, stones carry archetypal energies and qualities pushed aside by patriarchal religion: warmth, fertility, the Mother; the divine and the human feminine, relatedness, and an instinct to connect, include, and gather. When this symbolic meaning is forgotten, stones lose their warmth and fertility, and become weapons to separate, expel, execute.

With all these things in mind, I’d like to turn our attention to the stones in our midst. These are literally *our* rocks. Gathered from Wisconsin streams and rivers decades ago by people of the former Holy Innocents, they formed the base of that church’s altar. This summer, they will become the base of a new, outdoor altar we are going to build here at the new St. Nicholas, of which the former Holy Innocents is such a vital part.

These are important rocks, cousins of the ones that killed Stephen **and** cousins of the stone that brought life to the Inuit boy. Like all stones, the stones of our altar, our church, and even our faith carry the archetypal potential for death and for life.

We may think that because none of us is going to pick up one of these stones and cast it at another human being that we are more evolved than Stephen's foes.

Don't buy it. Human beings are stone throwers.

The rocks **we** throw today don't come from our hands. Our rocks are verbal rocks, rocks of not-doing, not-seeing, not understanding. For even in a good-hearted community like ours, we wound one another. Even in a good-hearted community like ours, we ignore the needs of persons not part of our community. Even in a good-hearted community like ours, we subtly exclude those who hold blasphemous views different from ours.

We've got so much to learn about rocks. Each time we gather around our new altar, I hope we will remember this. And I hope we will use our stones for life.

When you lift these stones and place them in the new altar – I hope everyone can participate in this project -- let them remind you of Mother Earth, for she grounds us in our humanity – and humanity, especially “feminine” humanity, is always the first casualty of patriarchal religion.

When you touch our stones – your stones -- and I hope you will touch them often when we gather around the altar, let them remind you of God's call to become warm and life-giving, fertile and spiritual, whole rather than divided.

Peter reminds us today that we have *received mercy*. May these stones always remind us that, having *received mercy*, we are empowered to share mercy.

As we remember these life-giving qualities of stones,, we will become, in Peter's words, *living stones*. We will find ourselves overflowing with *pure, spiritual milk*. And with mercy and love, we will turn our abundant breasts to feed a hungry world.

Seeing this, God our Mother will glad. God our Father will rejoice. And Stephen's heart – and the hearts of all the vulnerable – will no longer be troubled or fearful. For we will then truly be God's people.