

**May 7, 2023**  
**“Living Stones”**  
**Psalm 31:1-5 / 1 Peter 2:4-10**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

I mean to be brief this morning. Both cause I'm still dragging a bit after yesterday's celebration of Ruth, and the past two weeks of grieving and preparation for yesterday. And because it's a Communion Sunday.

Today we're talking oxymorons. You know, like:

- almost exactly
- deafening silence
- old news
- only choice
- same difference
- living dead

And in our case, from the 1<sup>st</sup> Peter reading, “living stones.”

Stones, of course, are not alive in any scientific sense. They do not meet the technical definition of living, which is to say: “They are made up of non-living materials” and “They do not grow, respire, need energy, move, reproduce, evolve or maintain homeostasis.”

I had to look homeostasis up. It means “any self-regulating process by which biological systems maintain stability while adjusting to conditions that are optimal for survival.”

I learned in preparing this sermon that the closest we come to living stones is with “lithops.” Do you know what lithops are?

Known as “flowering” or, in fact, “living” stones, they are plants that mimic small stones in shape, size and color. You can buy them or plant them, but in the wild, in dry regions of southern Africa, their striking resemblance to stones is a means of protection – fooling animals that would otherwise eat them during drought.

Who knew this sermon was gonna turn into a science lesson?

Living stones is an intriguing description for the author to use. Biblical scholarship, by the way, suggests that the author was not Peter, the famed disciple. Not even Peter at all, just someone writing under the pseudonym.

In any case, living stones. A curious choice of words but when you think about it, a perfect post-Resurrection metaphor. That which is dead, which is in no way living, comes alive. And not only that, that which is alive becomes a firm foundation upon which to build.

The author starts with Jesus as a living stone, and then invites the rest of us to be like living stones – to allow ourselves to be built, stone by stone, into a spiritual house. With Jesus, with Jesus' way of radical, revolutionary love, as the cornerstone.

Here the author quotes the prophet Isaiah: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen, precious; and whoever believes in that stone will not be put to shame."

And as living stones, we are being built into a spiritual house – individually and collectively – IN ORDER THAT we might be a "holy priesthood." Or a "royal priesthood," as verse 9 puts it. Each of us, all of us together.

The holy or royal priesthood reflects divine words first spoken to Moses atop Mt. Sinai – with instruction to share them with the Israelites gathered below. An exchange found in the Book of Exodus, just before the establishment of Mosaic law, covenant law – beginning with the 10 Commandments.

"Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession ... Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom," a priestly dominion, "and a holy nation."

And what do priests do – or should I say, what are priests supposed to do? Verse 9, again, says that, as "God's own people," it's about proclaiming "the mighty acts of God who called you out of shadow into God's marvelous light." Witnessing to the divine presence in our lives. Mediating God's presence for each other.

It's about connection, not conversion. Pointing to and fostering loving connection, with God, with each other as ourselves, we become God's people, God's hands and feet reflecting the God of Love in the world around us. As the text goes, "once bereft of mercy, but now rich in mercy." Here quoting Hosea.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests, becoming and being God's people "is not a favor; it's an assignment." Love and mercy, in action, in practice, in commitment to justice and peace, is our calling. The mark of our identity as God's people.

The author of Peter's letter quotes the heck out of Hebrew scripture, piecing together various references to stone to make their case. First the bit about the cornerstone from Isaiah, then from the Psalms and Isaiah a second time, with language asserting that if Jesus' way of love is not a living stone for you, it will instead be a stumbling stone, a "rock of offense." It will make you fall.

This, friends, is a daily reality, not a one-time, once-and-for-all decision. It is a truth that unfolds with every single decision we make about how we engage with each other, with ourselves, with all living things. With all of creation.

Will the divine way of love be – in this moment, in this interaction, in this relationship, in this situation – a living stone, a foundation on and from which we can build and grow love? Or will it be a stumbling block? Will we trip and lose our footing, like when you catch an unexpected rise in the sidewalk or miss a step up.

Divine love calls us to higher ground and – to play out the metaphor – sharpens and broadens our vision. Enables us, if you will, to better see the unexpected rise in the sidewalk or the step-up that love requires so that we can stay on our feet. Grounded and firm.

But we are human, so let's be honest shall we? Loving as God loves, as Jesus did, is hard sometimes. Maybe all the time.

We have a neighbor who, in the nearly two years since she moved in with her two young sons and two loud dogs, has pretty well ignored the 'good neighbor' checklist. Other neighbors, especially the ones who share a twin wall with her, are beyond fed up. We've had some conversations with her about our concerns, but it has not made much difference so far.

I'll spare you the details, but the point is that loving her has been hard. I'm not there yet. When my better angels prevail, I take a step back and open myself up to curiosity about her life, open myself up to what it would mean to show love to her.

Sometimes I pull it off, in the moment or on a particular day. I allow my hard heart to come alive and become a living stone on which to build. I take time to ask her how she's doing, try to build the relationship.

But then the dogs go Cujo-crazy, AGAIN, through the window as I'm walking past, or we find more trash that the boys left on our side of a shared driveway. And the living stone becomes a stumbling block. My soft heart turns hard again.

And as we noted last week, if love is the way into the metaphorical sheepfold, into the experience of abundant life, then coming in by any other way is theft. Taking what does not belong to you.

Again, this IS NOT about drawing a line between believers and non-believers. Christians and non-Christians. It is simply acknowledging that the love to which Jesus calls us is freaking hard. It is hard, sometimes, to even believe in it, that it's even possible, much less practice it.

Today you may pull it off. Tomorrow, or even later today, there's a pretty good chance you won't. As Paul Simon sings, "We are born and born again like waves on the sea." All of us.

As God's people, we ALL stumble and fall. But as God's people, "once bereft of mercy, but now rich in mercy," we are also called to get back up when we do. To keep trying. To keep learning to love more deeply and widely and consistently.

To be like living stones, grounded on living stones, cornerstones, like Jesus, like grandmama Ruth, as we called her in our family. Built together, in love, stone by stone, into spiritual houses that we can call home. That ALL can call home.

May it be so.