

Sermon for May 10, 2020
5th Sunday of Easter (Year A)
Sermon Text: 1Peter 2: 2-10 and John 14: 1-14
Sermon Title: *Living Stones*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, we gather in our home worship today to offer you praise and glory. May our worship be pleasing to you. We ask that you shine your face upon us this morning that we might see your face in one another and hear your voice in the words that are spoken and the songs that are sung. Through your grace make us living stones and build us into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. Once we were not a people, but now we are your people; once we had not received mercy, but now we have. Give us the voices, O Holy God, to proclaim your mighty acts to all the world. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Light and illumine us from within; come as Holy fire and burn in us; come as Holy Wind and cleanse us; come as Holy Truth and show us your way; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

When I first moved to Virginia, I lived in Big Stone Gap, a small town tucked into the southwest corner of the state. Virginia's southwest is an area of breathtaking mountains and stone outcroppings, terrific bluegrass and country music, and great storytellers. It is also one of the areas, in addition to eastern Kentucky and east Tennessee, populated by Melungeons. **Melungeon** is a term applied to groups of people who live in Cumberland Gap in isolated communities whose ancestry is clouded in mystery. They are characterized physically by dark hair, dark eyes, and swarthy skin. Some thought they were gypsies from Portugal or Spain; others described the Melungeons as tri-racial, a mixture of African, European, and Native American ancestry. They had names like Collins and Gibson, and they lived in Newman's Ridge. They were outcasts, displaced people. Parents would scare their children with stories of the Melungeons kidnapping errant children. Marriageable age young women were told that it was better to be an old maid than marry a Melungeon and live in Newmans' Ridge. When I came to the lectionary reading from 1st

Peter, this disenfranchised group popped into my mind. Here's why. The first letter of Peter is believed to have been sent by the apostle Peter from Rome to Christians in five Roman provinces in the northwest corner of Asia Minor, a peninsula between the Aegean and Black Seas. This place was remote, far off the grid of Roman power. The people who lived there were nobodies, with no social standing; they were displaced people, like the Melungeons, who were frequently targeted for persecution. It is to these people in Asia Minor, and to people like my Melungeons in Southwest Virginia that Peter writes: *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*. Are you kidding?

So what *is* the truth that Peter is speaking? **Peter is talking about the people's encounter with Jesus Christ.** That's the game changer. Peter doesn't ignore their rather dismal present circumstances; rather he refuses to let the circumstances define the people. Peter focuses on the goodness of God, which never changes. The other element that never changes is the redemptive quality of a relationship in which mercies are bestowed as generously as mother's milk. From the encounter with Christ and with God's mercies, the people can let themselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. God's own people are empowered to sing, to protest, to pray, to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. No stereotypes can claim them because they have been claimed by God!

Peter uses this wonderful image in his letter of a living stone. Scripture is filled with stones and images of stones: Jacob used one for a pillow; former slaves carried stones from the Jordan to the promised land; the stone was

called to be a reminder of the people's promise before God in Joshua, and John the Baptist declared that stones could come to life when he preached at the Jordan. Christ is a living stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

Our gospel lesson from John continues this building metaphor. As the gospel describes Jesus' farewell discourse, the hearts of the disciples who have gathered to share this last meal with Jesus must have been confused, breaking, and uncomprehending. Judas has betrayed Jesus, and Jesus tells the disciples that he will not be with them for very much longer. Who will they become without Jesus? But Jesus comforts them: *In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.* The words *dwell* and *dwelling place* come from the same Greek word *to abide* . In Greek, to abide means to take up a permanent residence, not just to visit or to pass through.

The power that Jesus talks about comes from the place where God has taken up permanent residence. If we want to see God, and what God values, then look at Jesus because as he says *Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me* . Jesus promises that the one who believes in him will do the works that he has done, because he is going to the father. For those of us, like Thomas, who wants to know which way *the way* is, here's the answer. God lives in us, if we love Jesus and keep his word. We are empowered to continue the work on earth that Jesus began.

Philip doesn't seem to be satisfied with the response that Jesus gives to Thomas, so he presses Jesus further: *Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.* Like most of us, Philip does not see the God who is present for him *now*. Or maybe we did get a glimpse of God and decided we didn't like the one we saw – the one who moves into the world, touches the untouchables, who heals the sick, rebukes the powerful, upsets the authorities, and raises the dead. In the end we all get the god we want.

My step-son who is a professor of art at Penn State will often tell his students not to draw the thing that they are trying to draw – an apple, a table, a young woman walking her dog, because then they will draw what they think those objects look like. Instead, he tells them, draw the space around the object. Only then will you be drawing the object as it really is. I think this is exactly what Jesus is telling Phillip: *Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.* Look at the space around me. See what I have done.

What does the space around me look like? Am I pursuing an intimate relationship with Jesus through study, prayer, and repentance? When the author of 1 Peter uses the image of the *living stone* he is describing the real temple, the real church, as one of community, not one of stones and mortar. As living stones, we are not fixed, but ever flexible and expansive. I think we have come to appreciate in this pandemic that the church doesn't depend on bricks and mortar. Everyone seems a little worried about the future of the church. Don't be. Follow Jesus into whatever room or place he takes you. *I am the way, the truth and the life,* Jesus says. In Jesus we have the

very presence of God in both word and deed. He has a cot waiting for you in the Kingdom, in the present, and in the life everlasting. Amen.