

**Readings**

Acts 7:55–60; Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16; 1 Peter 2:2–10; John 14:1–14

Like living stones, let yourself be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

Our scriptures today come from the Revised Common Lectionary, the three-year rotation of readings offered by an interchurch body once called the Consultation on Church Union (now called, Churches Uniting in Christ). The purpose of the unified sequence of readings is to give us mainline Christians something like one voice, making us seem like one people on the one day of the week when we are both the most united and the most segregated, by culture, tradition, format, and style.

So, blame the composers of the Revised Common Lectionary for coming up with this at first apparently misbegotten set of rocky references. Maybe they meant to create this stone soup in order to demonstrate the plethora of purposes to which stones may be used. And, what is more, the precise purposes for which we – individually and as a church – have been designed.

There is Psalm 31, which proclaims God our Rock and our Refuge; and Acts 7, ironically marking the stoning of Stephen; then also John 14, in which Jesus figures himself as a masterbuilder; and finally my own subject matter, First Peter 2, encouraging us to think of ourselves as building materials for a new and spiritual temple dedicated to God.

Last week, I used a reading from First Peter to show how we may be at one with God through sufferings like Christ endured. This week, I want to concentrate on our reading from First Peter to offer you the possibility that we may be at one with God by understanding and cultivating a character for ourselves like that which Christ revealed – accepting and affirming of others, regardless of our differences.

Strangely enough, the author of First Peter encourages this by emphasizing how we are like living stones. You would think that the impermeability and hardness of stones would make for us a metaphor for closedness and isolation, but that is not the case...

We are to be living stones, hewn and polished and fitted together into a great and brilliant temple for our God.

Sadly for the Church, this is usually an ought-to-be statement rather than a statement of reality. Throughout our history, and especially since Christianity became a major Western religion, I think, it has been less common for us to employ our stoniness in order to be a temple, and more in order to be some kind of rocky armory to smite perceived foes and competitors.

Our religion is part of ourselves, but historically Christians have used bits of our religion, to abuse others. It's been like breaking off a bit of ourselves, to use as a projectile, an offense against others. This is probably grounded in the persecution we received at the hands of others for the first three centuries of our existence (*They once stoned Stephen? Well, then, we'll just stone them back!*), but, based on the learnings of grace and peace that we have from our Redeemer, it is indefensible nowadays and ever since the Fourth Century when we became a world power. In other words, we have been justifying our bad behavior of *unjustifiably* stoning others, using rather selectively language or meanings we have found in the Bible.

Take as one example our historical responses to Jesus' words to Philip in the fourteenth chapter of the gospel according to John: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

These words have been used and, let's be blunt, abused by Christians for centuries. They have served as words of comfort in nearly every funeral service I have ever performed, but

outside of funerals, the saying has tended to create an elitist, exclusionary attitude among Christians, against people of other religions or of no religion at all. We living stones have had a common tendency to hurl this saying like a weapon, when we should not.

Some, like the scholars in the Jesus Seminar, have counter-argued that Jesus never actually said these words. In fact, according to a majority of the Jesus Seminar, Jesus himself never said anything that has been recorded in the gospel according to John. Rather, John is a voice of Christian tradition as it would have been heard in the late First and early Second Centuries. The voice of Christ here, they say, is actually the voice of the early Church.

I can neither confirm nor deny this claim, and (frankly) neither can the Jesus Seminar. It's just their best guess. Mind you, it's a pretty good guess, I'm sure. But I suspect that the reason for them arguing against *these* words coming out of Jesus' mouth is that they want to discredit the abuses for which they've been used.

Unfortunately, by claiming that Jesus never said what he says in John, the Jesus Seminar pretty effectively challenges the authority of John's gospel when, in fact, what it would be far better to do – for the sake of Christian history and tradition – would be, to make an alternative interpretation of the gospel as accurate as possible. Because even the most strict readers of the gospel have to admit, the saying, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” can have numerous meanings.

The first meaning you might find, is the most traditionally recognized: Jesus is the only way to heaven. I'll admit right now, this might be what it means. It might have been what Jesus meant. Given what else we know about Jesus, however, if most of the rest of the sayings attributed to him are true, then to affirm in these words some sort of exclusive right to heaven for his followers is ridiculous. And, further, to use these words to marginalize and exclude, or even villify, others is sinful.

You see, in John and all the other gospels, Jesus has numerous encounters with non-believers, or – at least – people who do not believe in God the way that he does, and in two cases he praises such people for their faith... a faith or a religion which is not the same as his.

I can think of four very vivid examples just off the top of my head.

In John, chapter 4, the Woman at the Well never actually confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. When she invites the other citizens of her hometown to come and meet Jesus, she does not offer them Jesus' own testimony about himself that he is the Messiah, therefore saying something like, “Come and meet the Messiah.” She says to them instead, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! *He cannot be the Messiah, can he?*” She still had doubts. Whatever the outcome of her encounter with Jesus may have been, she still exercised a measure of skepticism. And even for all those who come to faith because of her introduction of them to Jesus, there is never any acknowledgment of her own newfound faithfulness. It's a little-observed circumstance, but I think it's very telling.

In other gospels, other non-Jews go to Jesus praying for a blessing or a healing, and none is denied. The centurion whose servant lies at home in bed, ill, is granted his prayer – this, according to some scholars, possibly being an indication of Jesus healing a soldier's homosexual lover; of this centurion, Jesus afterward remarks that he has never before witnessed faith so profound.

There is also the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus on behalf of her dying daughter while he is visiting a friend in the Gentile city of Tyre; he at first refuses to provide for her, but she responds to his rebuff so cleverly, Jesus decides that he must.

My final example is the most vivid to me of Jesus' lack of concern for whether someone should come to him in order to get to heaven: the story of the man and spirits called Legion – whom Jesus exorcises shortly after the feeding of the five thousand, in Gentile country where he has gone, presumably to flee the five thousand. The miracle of the exorcism, ending in the deaths of hundreds of pigs and, evidently, the livelihoods of the swineherds who tended them,

results in those same people pleading for Jesus to leave them alone. In two of the accounts, though the man who was Legion asks Jesus to take him with him, the Messiah refuses, saying that this man must stay where he is and tell the others about the healing he had received by the grace of the God of the Jews.

So, here are a Samaritan, a Roman, a Canaanite, and a pork consumer. None is reported to change stripes. In fact, of the four the last is actually commanded to retain his! But all are deemed worthy at least of recognition and honor by God's own Son. This appears to me to indicate that the idea of faith or belief *in Jesus* as the *only way* to heaven is at least somewhat questionable.

Jesus lived in a pluralistic society much like ours. He may not have affirmed other religions' credibility but neither did he deny them. And nowhere other than here in John, chapter 14, in this moment at the table of the last supper, has it been alleged that he claimed exclusive access to God by his followers. Heaven would appear, instead, to be attainable by people who – perhaps unbeknownst to themselves or even despite themselves, or even more! despite the efforts of Christian believers – happen to act *as if* they trusted in God. *As if* is close enough, it is clear: so stop worrying about what other people think or believe, and work on yourself!

What do you think? What do you believe? What do you sense, or see, or taste, feel, smell, hear? To what are you obligated, or to whom? If you're a living stone, to what use are you putting yourself as you seek to exist according to your faith? How shall you express that faith as well as possess it? Possession, as they say, may be nine-tenths of the law, but there is still that last tenth you need to worry about! Jesus in these stories demonstrates that God is valuing that last tenth (expression of faith) pretty highly in people who don't believe the way you do. So, how very much must God be valuing it in us who have faith in God..?

One more way of interpreting the saying, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life," is to hear in those words first of all the words "I am." For Jesus, a Jew, to be speaking these words is in a very important sense for him to be acknowledging and revering the Holy Name. God's Name cannot be spoken, but it can be referred to. Thus, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" could be viewed as a statement of reverence for the Creator, Jesus' own personal creed, you might say. With these words in John 14, I would argue (counter to the Jesus Seminar and counter to popular Christian understanding), Jesus is not referring to himself (or, at least, not himself alone), and neither is he doing so in the five other "I am" statements and discourses in John. He is affirming and extolling the presence, the power of God.

This way, since he is the Messiah and God's own conqueror of the world, for him to say "No one comes to the Father except through me" is just one more faith-filled exclamation. The Messiah here proclaims his cosmic role for the persecuted People of God. It's as much to say to the powers and the principalities who would persecute his people, "If you want to take on God, you'll have me to deal with me as the first line of defense." Thus Jesus both expresses the identity of God ("I am the way and the truth and the life"), and his own identity as well... and rather militantly, I should add ("No one comes to the Father except through me.").

The stone that the builders rejected thus has become the chief cornerstone, and how shall we living stones with our Messiah not be joined together into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God – honoring our God, defending God's people!

Jesus is our builder and our cornerstone, our keystone: our way, our truth, our life! We have come to this moment, this place, through the one who is our rock, our refuge, our first and only and insurmountable line of defense against the evil and the cruelty of this world. So, we will not, we may not, we shall not use Christ's words as projectiles and blunt instruments – slinging stones to exclude or isolate those others who are beloved of our God, whether they are faithful to related traditions, to other traditions or to no tradition. Goodness is goodness, in God's eyes, and should be so in ours as well; righteousness is righteousness; and in a world so

bent with misery, shame, and cruelty, in a world so broken and torn by sin, we – like Jesus – shall recognize and receive righteousness where it resides... in other living stones in this stone soup of a world God has cooked up.

We are stones hewn for building, for salvation, not for destruction. We are being polished and fitted together for the protection of the vulnerable and the like-minded, not for their abuse.

We can be not only a sanctuary for God but a haven for those who seek shelter from the world. And this we need to do without requirement or expectation from those others, and certainly without retaliation.

May God bless us living stones on our way to not only possessing Christian faith but expressing it as well. Amen.