

Sermon – Cornerstones

Scriptures – Acts 4:5-12, 1 John 3:16-24

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Our first reading today is Acts, chapter 4, verses 5-12. Peter and John have been arrested after healing a man outside the temple and preaching the good news of the resurrection. In today's portion of the story, Peter turns their trial into another opportunity to preach the love of God through Christ. While we may not hear God's love explicitly mentioned, in naming Jesus the rejected stone that has become the cornerstone, Peter quotes Psalm 118, which proclaims the eternal and steadfast love of God, a connection his Jewish listeners would instantly make. Hear now God's holy Word.

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6 with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7 When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11 This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone." 12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Amen.

Our second reading today comes from the epistle 1 John, chapter 3, verses 16-24. This letter, likely written by an elder of the church, came from an early Christian community that celebrated the love of God in Christ, famously writing in the chapter immediately following today's reading that God is love, and that perfect love casts out fear. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: Cornerstones

The text: "This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'" Acts 4:11

Let us pray. Holy God, by laying down your life for your flock you reveal your love for all. Lead us from the place of death to the place of abundant life, that guided and assured by your love for us, we may rightly offer our lives in love for you and our neighbors. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Seven months ago, I sat in the Tower Room and looked across a table that felt far too big, at three thirteen-year old boys. They looked back at me, and through the lens of my self-doubts and worry, I saw expressions of skepticism, judgment, and a distinct sense of being thoroughly unimpressed. Gentlemen, I apologize for reading so much into your polite and attentive silence. But there was something so frightening about the small number of our first class—I can talk about theology, church history, and polity until the cows come home, but in that room, sitting around a table, facing three silent teenagers, the nagging voices of expectation and pressure to achieve seemed awfully loud. I had nothing to hide behind—and so the four of us had no choice but to begin the difficult, vulnerable, and Christian work of being nothing but ourselves. Fortunately, it all seems to have turned out alright.

That Tower Room has become a place where I know God, for in that room I have had the extraordinary privilege of spending time with the nine young people we commission this weekend, of listening to their thoughts and beliefs and questions, and sharing my own. In today's reading from Acts, Peter is defending himself and John in front of the authorities because they healed a man, because of a good deed done to one who was sick. We didn't read that part of the story, but it is as moving as any of the healings in the Gospels.

On their way into the temple for afternoon prayer, Peter and John are stopped by a man lame from birth, who spends his days begging at the entrance to the temple. Peter demands this man's attention, looks him in the eye, and tells him they have no money—but what they have they will give. And then he tells him, in the name of Jesus, to stand and walk. And Peter takes him by the hand and raises him up, and immediately his feet and ankles are made strong, and he goes into the temple with Peter and John, walking and leaping and praising God, and he remains with them, a new companion on the way.

While we never had any such dramatic moments in the Tower Room on Sunday afternoons, this is what we did week after week. In our time together, we looked each other in the eye, we reached out our hands, and we raised each other up, and in so doing became companions on this way. Sometimes we spent so much time in this work that we forgot our Confirmation curriculum. "Today's topic in seven minutes!" was often our rallying cry near the end of our hour together. Whether in seven minutes or seventy, we covered 2000 years of Christian history, Presbyterian polity and the polities of other churches, the Trinity and its Persons, worship, the sacraments, the liturgical year, other religions, other forms of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and anything and everything else we could think of. For Confirmation is the moment of choice for Presbyterians, the time when we choose to affirm the baptismal vows our parents made for us, and it is important to make that choice as knowledgably as possible.

BUT. This is not the end of that choice, or the end of Confirmation. Sorry, kids. Students, your work is not over. For affirming your baptism and confirming yourself as a Christian is not a one time deal. It is a life long process. Each of us, all of us, must do this every moment of every day. Christians, we have work to do. Our

reading from 1 John tells us what this life of Confirmation will look like—laying down our lives for others, loving in action as much as we love in word, giving what we have when we see someone in need. We must make this radical love shown to us by Christ the cornerstone of our lives. And it is radical—it was when Peter proclaimed it, and it is today. For this is the stone that the builders rejected. This is the foundation declared unacceptable, and unprofitable.

In our confirmation, we choose and acknowledge Christ as the cornerstone of our lives—and this is radical and revolutionary. For the world shouts at us to build on other foundations, foundations with lower risk, and greater return, foundations chosen and approved by a society focused on profit, on achievement, on appearances. In the Tower Room each week, the noise of these society-approved stones came up again and again—homework and classmates and exams and projects and Cornell notes and PARCC testing, anxiety, overscheduling, expectations of teachers and parents and coaches, the drive to achieve, excel, be liked, be successful—These are the foundations given to us by society—given to all of us, not just teenagers. And it is so easy to build our lives on them—on promotions and raises and deadlines and evaluations and expectations—

But Peter says NO, because Jesus said no. Peter reminds us that there is salvation in no earthly power—nothing other than the radical love of God. And it is this that must be the cornerstone of our lives. And with this cornerstone, 1 John tells us, comes a new way of living, one in which we lay down our lives for others and help all in need. Christians, we have work to do! There are so many in need. From Kenya to Syria, from Springfield to China, from California to Kathmandu, Nepal, there are so many in need. This confirmation of ours cannot just be one moment, but must be every moment of our lives.

This is the point at which I get all fired up. This is when I write down the verses from 1 John on pieces of paper and tape them up all over my house. Where I write them on my hand and on my bookmarks and on a post-it on my laptop so that I never forget these words and so that I am always ready to do this work and live into my baptism! And the exhaustion starts to creep in. And fear. Who's going to take care of me? And doubt. How can I do all this? And defeat. There's no way I can do all that. And guilt. I'm a terrible Christian. I'm a terrible person. And failure. I have failed God. Because when I take these verses and turn them into a to do list taped on every wall of my life, I have made them into their own set of expectations and achievements, and once again have built my life on MY accomplishments rather than on Christ. And so our hearts condemn us, reminding us of how we have failed, of how few we have helped, of how little we have done.

BUT. God is greater than our hearts. God is greater than our self-doubt and self-defeat and self-loathing. Our inner voices of fear and failure and guilt are not the cornerstones of our lives—God is. And God loves us! God reaches into our hearts and takes us by the hand, strengthening our spirits, mending our hearts and freeing our voices so that like the man lame from birth we might walk and leap and rejoice and live in love. God loves us! God leads our hearts to peace and stillness, restoring our souls with the greatest tender care and abundant love. This love God shows us, this love God breathes through us, is the cornerstone of our hearts, the cornerstone of our inner lives, giving us the strength and peace to make living for others the cornerstone of our outer lives, and of our every action.

Christians, we have work to do! For the voices of the world are loud, and too often drown out love. Our work is to turn to Christ, to the voice of our good shepherd. Our work is to make space in our hearts so that we can turn all our attention to God, and allow ourselves to be taken by the hand and loved. Every Sunday afternoon, as these nine young people prepared to be confirmed, our time in the Tower Room started the same way. We went around that table that once felt too big, and shared a moment from our week when we felt close to God, and a moment when we felt cut off from God. In this simple act we made room for God's voice in our lives and hearts. For, Christians--this is the work we must do to live in love.

So I invite you to be as bold as our Confirmation class, and to try an experiment in prayer, right now. I invite you to empty your hands, to close your eyes, to settle into your body, to feel your breath as the Holy Spirit breathes through you. Allow yourself to become aware of God's presence, here in this room, here within your heart. Now consider your week. Look back on what happened. Who did you encounter? What did you do? How did you feel? As you recall your week, ask yourself--where did I give the most love? Allow God to bring your attention to these moments of love. Stay with whatever moment God has given you. Be open--allow the moment to sit with you. Hold this experience of love. What did it feel like? What were you like? What might God be seeking to teach you? Now, ask yourself: where did I receive the most love? Again, stay with whatever moment God has given you. Hold this experience of love. What did it feel like? What were you like? Now, gently turn your attention back to your week and ask: where did I give and receive the least love? Hold in your heart whatever moment God has given you. What did it feel like? What were you like? What might God be seeking to teach you? I invite you to release whatever moment God has brought to you, and to rest in God's presence, to feel God's love and care for you pouring over you and breathing through you. Thank God for this time, and as you are ready, bring your attention back to our gathered community.

Christians--this is the work we have to do. With these nine young people we affirm that there is salvation in no earthly power, and that Christ is the cornerstone of our lives. And so we must turn our attention to God every day: we must listen for the call of God, and be attentive to God's radical love for US. For when we pay attention, when we listen--THEN we can respond. When we live in love, when love abides in us, THEN we can live out love for others. Christians, we have work to do! Thanks be to God.