

Sermon May 17, 2020

OGHS Collection & Recognition of Graduates

“A Living Stone”

Genesis 28: 10-19a 1st Peter 2:4-5 Matthew 16:13-18

First United Church of Arvada

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From early childhood and throughout my life, while walking on a mountain trail, through the Ozark woods, or along a riverbank, I have found myself, picking up certain stones that call out to me. I often look at one closely and hold it for a moment. Have you ever noticed children’s innate fascination with stones? There is a sense of wonder in the very young about these miracles of nature and an intuitive awareness of some kind of deep connection to them. During our adult years, in our relationship to the earth, we have developed a more distant approach to this previously direct primitive experience. When we look down at the path we are usually watching our step to make sure the stones don’t trip us up, (don’t get me wrong I recommend this highly). If we do interact with a stone in our path, we are more likely to kick it out of the way than to approach it in reverence. Have you ever thought about how these mineral bodies have humbly and unhurriedly carried their silent messages within themselves for billions of years to arrive at this moment in our path? Is it possible that these stones, seemingly so mute and inert, have something to teach us about our humanity— about the life of the spirit? In this morning’s passage from Genesis we find the rather curious image of Jacob resting his head upon a stone as he sleeps. The most dramatic image in this passage is, of course, Jacob’s ladder, which appears in his dream—a ladder connecting heaven and earth, upon which angels are seen ascending and descending. Jacob’s silent stone pillow, though it is equally as important an image, is often overlooked. When Jacob awakens from his sleep, he takes the stone, anoints it with oil, and sets it as a pillar, declaring, “Surely God was in this place.” He names the stone, “Bethel,” (“Beth” meaning “house” and “el” meaning “God.” Of course, the stone was more than a marker for Jacob. It had become a medium for the spirit, which, somehow, in its permanence, ancientness, and “stony” silence, became a dreamy conductor for the spirit of God. When we look ahead into The New Testament, we see other references to stones and their significance. We see Jesus holding up the emblematic importance of the stones when he renames Simon. He declares, “You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church” (the name, Peter, comes from the Greek “Petra” which means a solid and native rock rising up through the earth). And then again, in the book of 1st Peter the power of the stone is held up in the charge put to the early Christian community, “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...” Just being human on this earth, in some mysterious way, means that we are seekers on a path and that it is not merely the idyllic final destination, which we seek. It is the path, itself, that really matters. Between birth and death, we face, well, we face LIFE—its dramas and traumas, and mysteries—its barren deserts and fertile valleys, its snowcapped peaks and its deep-sea torments, its sirens and its muses, its beginnings and endings, its partings and its reunions. Stones have, throughout history, been used to guide us. They can mark our path in simple, physical ways, like the trail markers some of us learned to make and read as children in scouts or church camps, when we stacked smaller rocks upon larger rocks to give direction at a junction for the ones traveling behind us. There is a Disciples’ church in Lafayette, CO, that named itself, “Cairn Christian Church”. Here they describe why

Our name is unusual. A cairn is a mound or stack of rocks built at the side of a pathway. Cairns are found all over the world. They are a place to rest. They are signs to show the way when the path is confusing or we are

lost. They are symbols of balance and harmony. They are markers of holy places where individuals and groups have experienced God's presence and decided to leave a lasting reminder. They are beautiful, spontaneous pieces of art that celebrate earth. Cairns are built by many hands working together over time or sometimes by a single person. They can be very simple or extremely elaborate. When we see a cairn, we are drawn to add our own stone to the pile. In all of these ways, the cairn is a metaphor for our life together and a reminder that we are always in process. We don't claim to have it all figured out, but we do claim to love and honor the journey. Okay, I confess, I am a little envious of that wonderful name for a church. Jacob's stone pillow, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, Britain's Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, the rocks on the Iona beach of Scotland, or the etched gravestone marking the life of someone we have known and loved. These inspire life—the material world, through its stones, holds the spiritual world in powerful ways. The silence of the stones challenges us to face our own silent truth and to connect with it. The permanence of the stones reminds us to seek the things in life, which are lasting. The stillness of the stone allows us to witness the deep patience and fortitude of the earth which will go on beyond our short lives. If we are able to enter into even a rudimentary relationship to a stone in our path, we might be able to receive and to accept the gift it modestly offers. There are many notions of what gifts a particular stone brings emotionally, physically, or psychically. These are catalogued in elaborate lists in books on rocks and gems. There may be truth to this, but it is not what I am talking about here. I am speaking of our capacity to be aware of the presence of a stone—not grasping at it for meaning—for what it has to offer our individual life. This is veiled egotism, this grasping at stones, is just another form of materialism. Our relationship to stones, to the earth itself, must not be acquisitive. If we are to *receive* any of the gifts of the spirit from nature it will not be by willful *seizing*, either intellectually or materially. It will be through reverent receiving, when we can truly see these mineral elements of the earth not simply as inert matter but, rather, as living beings. Science has taught us that the inert object that we pull out of our lawns or trip over on a mountain path or slip on as we wade in creek or river is not so stubbornly inert. The atoms of which each is made are swirling energy, microcosms of energy. We might not realize that we have just discarded or tripped over or slipped upon an entire galaxy of life's energy. This should inspire our awe not our annoyance. In the symbol of the stone as a House of God, put forth in Genesis, we learn that spirituality doesn't belong only to the skies and to the otherworld, of which we can know little. In the charge to the early Christians to be "to let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...by becoming "like living stones," we find a spiritual awareness that the stones also live. The earth itself, elementally, holds profound truths and patiently awaits our attention and our appreciation. If a stone can symbolize Beth-el, a house of God, then the earth, itself, can hold deep meaning for each of us if we will only stand in reverent silence before its wonder—if we will look and listen. So, I encourage each of you during this time of trial, as we are battling nature's power to take life through the Covid 19 virus, to remember Jacob's reverence for the stone upon which he laid his head. As you walk out the doors of your own "Beth-el," "your own house of God," continue in the spirit of this morning's worship, by communing with these quiet beings of God's natural world. Pick up a stone in your path, even if it is only on the edge of a sidewalk. Look at its unique contours and colors and give thanks. Hold a larger stone in both hand and feel its powerful density and weight. Find a good size boulder, if you can, and sit upon it or lean against it. Sense its ancient, patient, comforting strength and wisdom. Rest in the rightness of God's creation. Replenish and recharge your spirit. Reconnect to the earth from which you came and will return. I will close today with a poem about the living nature of stones. I read this poem at the memorial services for two beloved men in our congregation who were geologists. The poem was written by Charles Simic and is entitled simply, "Stone."

STONE by Charles Simic
Go inside a stone That
would be my way. Let somebody else become a
dove Or gnash with a tiger's tooth. I am happy to be
a stone. From the outside the stone is a riddle: No
one knows how to answer it. Yet within, it must be
cool and quiet Even though a cow steps on it full
weight, Even though a child throws it in a river; The
stone sinks, slow, unperturbed To the river bottom
where the fishes come to knock on it And listen. I
have seen sparks fly out When two stones are
rubbed, So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;
Perhaps there is a moon shining From somewhere,
as though behind a hill— Just enough light to make
out The strange writings, the star-charts On the
inner walls.