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LIVING STONES: A SERMON ON 1 PETER 2:4-5

In April 1975, Gary Dahl had an idea. It was a silly but clever idea, and in a few months time, most newspapers in the United States ran stories on his idea and Mr. Dahl found himself on the *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* twice. By the end of the year, he was a millionaire. What was his idea? Gary Dahl wanted a pet that didn't wake you up in the middle of the night, didn't need to be fed or let loose outside, didn't misbehave, and didn't make messes. So he invented the Pet Rock. Each Pet Rock came in a carrying case complete with air holes so it could breathe, swaddled in hay for its comfort, and included a thirty-two page training manual on how to take care of and train your new pet. The manual included ideas like how to housetrain your Pet Rock: "Put your Pet Rock on some old newspapers. The rock will never know what the paper is for and will require no further instruction." It also included ideas on training your Pet Rock to sit, stay, play dead, and attack on command (although this last one required assistance from its owner).

Thirty-six years later, we look back and laugh. A Pet Rock? Really? And all it did was sit there? Today we are far more advanced. Check this out—a Pet Rock for the 21st century. It comes with USB cord. You can plug this baby into your PC or Mac, or plug it into your laptop while on the go. And do you know what this rock does when it's plugged into your computer? Absolutely nothing! Apparently a rock with a USB cord is still just a rock.

Most of us think the opposite of the word "alive" is "dead", but that's not true. Something that's dead was once alive. The real opposite of "alive" is "lifeless". This rock is lifeless. It has never been alive and it never will be alive—that is, it will never be alive outside of an act of God. God can take lifeless rocks and turn them into living stones—a community of people who are active in the world, building blocks for God's spiritual house.

1 Peter 2:4-5 says, "By coming to him, a living stone, which was rejected by humans but which is a precious chosen stone in God's sight, you yourselves, as living stones, are also being built into a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus the Christ."

Peter didn't invent this idea of Christ being a stone. Genesis 49 makes a reference to the Shepherd and Rock of Israel. In Zechariah 10, God promises to replace the leaders who don't take good care of his people with a "cornerstone" from Judah who will lead the people in overcoming the enemy. By the first century, the Qumran Jewish community had applied cornerstone and rock imagery to the messiah. Jesus applied this imagery to himself in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Quoting from Psalm 118, Jesus said: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

Now since Jesus described himself in the gospel of John as living water and living bread from heaven, it only makes sense that Christ will not only be a stone, but a living stone.

So Christ is a living stone, and those people who come to him are also living stones. Our identities come from our connection to Christ. We are living stones because Christ is a living stone. Now, rocks aren't supposed to be alive. But through an encounter with Christ the impossible happens. Through an encounter with Christ, the lame walk. Through an encounter with Christ, the blind see. Through an encounter with Christ, the dead live. Through an encounter with Christ, lifeless rocks become living precious stones.

You know, rocks often get a bum rap. When someone is unfeeling, we say he or she has a heart of stone. When there are no good choices, we say we're caught between a rock and a hard place. If you make a lot of bad decisions or add two and two together and get three, people might say you're as dumb as a box of rocks. When you do something that could upset everything and get people in trouble, we call it rocking the boat. When life gets the worst that it can get, we call it hitting rock bottom.

Christ, the original living stone, was rejected by human beings, and not just any human beings. They were his own people! It should not surprise us, then, when we are rejected, too. John reminds us, "Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you." (1 John 3:13) Jesus says, "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you, too." (John 15:20) As a living stone, expect to be rejected. The world will think you're not good enough for them, when the truth is through Christ, you are too good for them.

We are blessed that God has different standards than the world does. One day a rock collector was out walking, and he passed by a pile of worthless rocks. He picked one up, examined it, and said, "I can make something out of this." He took it home and polished it until it shone. Then he put it on display with his precious stones: his emeralds, rubies, and sapphires.

This is what God does for us. When we were like worthless rocks, God said, "I can make something out of these." He chose us and transformed us into something precious. We became chosen, precious, living stones, and he counts us among his special treasures. God has a purpose in mind for us. And this purpose is for us as a group that is far greater than the sum total of what we could do individually. As the saying goes, "The whole is greater than its parts."

Ancient Sparta was a city famous for its wall. One day a visiting dignitary came to Sparta and Sparta's king showed him around the city. The dignitary saw Sparta's temple, theater, and sculptures, but looking around, he didn't see any great wall. Finally he asked the king, "Where is Sparta's great wall? I have heard of it and wanted to see it." So the king of Sparta took his guest to see the Spartan army. The king opened his arms wide and said, "See this army? This is Sparta's great wall, and every man is a brick!"¹

Isaiah 28:16-17b: So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be dismayed. I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line."

Back to 1 Peter 2:5: "You all, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house." God is building himself a house, his lasting legacy, the place on earth where he will dwell forever. After laying down the foundation of Jesus Christ, he uses us, his people, as bricks in the walls of his home. God's house will be marked by unity, integrity,

¹ Story by W. Barclay, retold in Jobes, 149.

justice, and righteousness. Only God can build a house like that. Only God can take people like you and me, put us together, and make something so beautiful.

When a competent mason builds a wall, the stones he uses are put in place to stay. If you try to remove a stone from the wall, you will sacrifice the wall's integrity. We are a community of living stones. We must support one another to make the walls strong. God uses every one of his living stones in building his house and places each one where he wants it to go. It's not up to us which stones get chosen or where each stone is placed. We should take care not to reject what God has chosen. Remember that rejecting God's chosen is what the world does.

Have you ever read a story and wished you could just reach inside the page and slap around one of the characters? I used to live in Enid, Oklahoma, and one day I came across this story about the experiences of an Enid couple named Roy and Carolyn. I got so angry I was in tears:

Roy and I... formed a community at [University Place Christian Church] that met weekly for a potluck evening meal in a seldom-used dining room. We invited [University Place] members, as well as people we had met in South Enid. It was a chance for poor and middle-class people to eat and pray together, and to pool our resources—of knowledge, money, skills, insights, our presence—toward meeting one another's needs—for friendship, the support of a community, and materials.

The community made what seemed like miraculous differences in the lives of many of its members, including ours. Roy and I were invigorated and enlivened by our participation in ways we had never known before. Acceptance by the community meant that one man, who was schizophrenic, and homeless, found the symptoms of his illness diminished. This meant he was able to apply for and receive Social Security disability benefits, and move off the street into his own apartment. The father of a family of four had become disabled and could not work. The community provided support for the two children and purchased a washer and dryer for the family. The community helped an older member who was blind and alcoholic, who lived in an abandoned chicken coop, to stop drinking and move into a nursing home, where he worked in the laundry room.

The community, while it was enlivening to its members, caused suspicion and discomfort in the [University Place] congregation. One deacon... told me I was "a crazy dreamer" for thinking poor and nonpoor people could be friends. Another prominent member complained to us that we were enabling laziness on the part of the family for whom we bought the washer and dryer. The minister did not talk about the community in services or any other church forums, so it remained more or less invisible. Only one middle-class [University Place] member, besides Roy and me, attended the weekly meetings on a regular basis.

The man who was blind and had been alcoholic, Bobby Ray Peterson, decided to join the church. He was standing with the minister after the service in which he became a member, as was the custom, so congregants could file by and welcome him. I was in line behind one of the

deacons, who was white. When the deacon reached Bobby Ray, instead of shaking his hand, he said to him angrily, “Why did you join this church? You have your own churches over there! Why don’t you stay on your own side of town?”

A hushed silence came and went. The minister said nothing. Others filed by and greeted Bobby Ray, who now looked crushed and terrified. Later, I asked the minister if she was going to say anything to the deacon about his comment. “What would I say?” she asked me.

“Maybe that such racist comments are offensive, and that he should apologize to Mr. Peterson,” I suggested. The minister said that the deacon was entitled to his opinion, even if we disagreed with him. Mr. Peterson never attended another service at [University Place Christian Church].²

I don't know who I wanted to slap around more, the deacon or the minister. They both should have known better.

Unfortunately, Roy and Carolyn were so angered and dismayed by their experience, they finally stopped going to church altogether. That’s an increasing problem nowadays. People get angry, hurt, or even bored with church and decide to reject the “religious establishment” to do the Christian thing all alone. All you need is Jesus, right? Once you’re saved, your bases are covered, right? Who needs those hypocrites at church? But what they forget is that God didn’t save you to give you a “get out of hell free” card and then let you go off and do your own thing. God had a purpose in saving you—he wants to build you into his house, his lasting legacy, his dwelling place in the world. He intends for you to be a part of a family—the family of God. Sometimes the family is your greatest strength. Sometimes family seems impossible to live with. But God is building us—all of us—up together into his house. It’s not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about this communion we have in Christ.

In order for God's house to be marked by unity, integrity, justice, and righteousness, we have to be people who actively seek unity, integrity, justice, and righteousness. That’s what it really means to be living stones. We are not God's “pet rocks”. We are not a joke or a cute idea. We are not a fad. We are not designed to just sit on a shelf and do nothing. Pet Rocks just sit there, but we as living stones are designed to be active in the world. We are not like this USB Pet Rock. We don't have fancy attachments that don't do anything. God gives us gifts to use in serving one another and expects us to use them. God intends for us to support one another as he builds us up together into his house, his legacy, his dwelling place in the world.

2 From http://www.mukto-mona.com/Articles/carolyn/christian_fundamentalism.htm