

Tom Hanks delivered a virtual commencement address last weekend for the graduates of Wright State University in Ohio. He called them “the chosen ones,” in part because of the pandemic that has changed our lives so dramatically. The actor explained: “You are the chosen ones because of a fate unimagined when you began your Wright State adventures.” As a result, he predicted, “You will be enlightened in ways your degree never held a promise. You will have made it through a time of great sacrifice and great need. No one will be more fresh to the task of restarting normalcy than you—our chosen ones.”

In today’s Scripture Peter identifies and challenges his listeners with similar words: *“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” 8 and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”* Besides the language of being chosen, there are NINE times in this passage where we find mention of stones, cornerstones, or rocks. Every time I read this passage I think about all the stones I have collected since I was a boy.

Stones and rocks appear often in Scripture and for purposes other than throwing, like in the story of David and Goliath. God is often referred to as a rock. And the patriarchs of the Old Testament set up stones wherever something important happened. The Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets. Moses struck a rock and water flowed from it. Stephen was killed by stoning. Simon had his name changed by Jesus to “Peter,” which means rock. And it was a large stone that was rolled away from the tomb when the women arrived on that Resurrection morning.

Our Scripture speaks of stones as building blocks. This passage comes from a time when buildings were most often built of stones. A construction site in Palestine would consist of piles and piles of stones to be used for the foundation and carefully placed together to build the walls.

The most important building block was the cornerstone. Today cornerstones serve more of a ceremonial function providing a place to record the historical data related to the building. Sometimes churches write the date the church was built on their cornerstones—such as on our building. But the cornerstone in Jesus’ day served a more important function. The cornerstone really was the one piece on which the rest of the house was built. If the cornerstone wasn’t set right then the rest of the house would not be square and would not stand the test of time. The cornerstone determined the character of the whole house.

Our Scripture today contains fluid imagery of stones. First, we're invited to come to Jesus, a living cornerstone. Though rejected by mortals, he was chosen and precious in God's sight. Then, we are admonished to be like living stones ourselves and to be built into a spiritual house. Christ is the "living stone" which has become the cornerstone of the church. What does Peter mean by this phrase "a living stone"? After all, a stone by its very nature is an inanimate object, that is, one that does not have life.

Well, first of all, Webster defines a stone as a rock which is used for a specific purpose, such as a building block, a paving block, a grindstone or a gravestone. If it is used for these specific purposes, then we must next ask why it is used for these purposes.

Obviously, a stone is known for its permanence, its imperviousness to change or to things like the weather. It is also not easily moved from one place to another, especially if it is a large stone. Once placed in a specific spot, it will stay there unless a greater force is exerted upon it. Now all of these qualities can be attributed to persons.

The following story might better illustrate this. Perhaps you have heard the expression, "He's a brick!"? Plutarch, in writing about the king of Sparta, tells how the phrase originated. It seems that an ambassador on a diplomatic mission visited the famous city of Sparta. Knowing that its strength was acclaimed throughout all Greece, he expected to see massive fortresses surrounding the city, but he found nothing of the kind. Surprised, the ambassador said to the king, "Sir, you have no fortifications for defense. How can this be?" "Oh, but we are well protected," replied the king. "Come with me tomorrow and I will show you the walls of Sparta." The next day he led the ambassador to the plains where Sparta's army was assembled in full battle dress. Pointing proudly to his soldiers, who stood fearlessly in place, the king said, "Behold! The walls of Sparta—ten thousand men and every one a brick!" (*He Was a Brick! From Sower's Seed of Encouragement, Fifth Planting*, pp. 64-65. Copyright 1998 by Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ).

Although this story talks about men being bricks, nothing would change if we referred to them as rocks. In this military analogy, the soldiers are rocks because they will not be moved and will be steadfast in their loyalty to their king. Because of this, being called a rock implies bravery and courage in the face of danger.

*"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:4-5). Living stones? A spiritual house? Peter continues to mix strange metaphors. Then we recall that there is something that can make a house a home...something that can transform the bricks and mortar, the boards and nails of a house into the "spiritual home" of a family.

There are houses, classrooms, offices and churches that are interchangeable boxes, forgotten as soon as we move on. Then there are the homes and rooms and sacred spaces that we never forget—the addresses etched forever in our minds. This is the kind of household that Peter would have us long to become. A peculiar congregation of people whose life appears flawed and unworthy. Yet, on closer inspection, a

household whose open doors welcome the world's outcast and prodigal children home. A royal household of 'living stones' that even the oldest and wisest long for.

Someone once said that God is like a great rock-collector who finds us. "*Once we were nobodies*" (v. 10)—Cinderellas, Rudolphs, Ugly Ducklings. But somehow God saw within us something that might become useful, so we might grow up, with help, into beautiful princesses, trustworthy guides for Santa's sleigh, or elegant swans. Then the great stone-cutter carves us.

Remember the story of Michelangelo carving David out of flawed marble. It may be painful to be carved, and we might lose some "asset" we thought important. But the carving is necessary. Or think of the rock-tumbling machine that bangs rough stones together to make them smooth. All the other rough-edged Christians are grinding down our interesting bumps. Finally, the great stone-mason fits us together.

"Lone Ranger" Christianity is harmful to our spiritual health. Just imagine Luke reporting at the Savior's birth: "*Suddenly a great soloist appeared with the angel, praising God*" I'd say that God loves duets more than solos, and he loves choirs more than duets. Perhaps we're all meaningless puzzle pieces until we're snapped together into God's big picture.

*"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (v. 4). That's who we are in this very place, a community of grace, a house of prayer for all people, a school of Christian formation, a mission outpost. We can be "living" stones as we come to Jesus, who was the Stone "*rejected by humans but chosen by God,*" the Stone that is the keystone of the arch, the foundation Stone of our life.

But becoming a living stone in this spiritual house is our choice.

At the end of his life Joshua called all the people together and said, "*But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD*" (24:15). Truly, we are God's chosen people who in every moment we live must choose and then choose again to serve God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. "*Then [Joshua] took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD. See! he said to all the people. This stone will be a witness...*" (24:26-27).

The living and precious Stone is asking that we make a choice—today—a choice to be true to our God. Amen.

(Thanks to Dr. Mickey Anders for many sermon ideas)