

# STONING OUR CHILDREN

## Sermon, July 24, 2016

### Vacation Bible School Sunday

**Texts: Joshua 4:1-7; Luke 11:1-13**

The children just sang that old classic, "Seek Ye First," the second stanza of which was drawn from verses nine and ten of our Gospel reading this morning, where Jesus says, *"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."*

Jesus promises that *all* who ask will receive, *all* who seek will find, *all* who knock shall have the door opened. Now ... we may not receive just what we ask, or find just what we thought we were seeking, or discover on the other side of the closed door just what we hoped to find, but Jesus message here is that God *listens* to our prayers and requests with all the attentiveness of a loving father, and just like any good father He delights in giving us what we need ... which may not always be exactly what we want. Because of His loving grace, you may not *get* what you *want*, but believe the good news ... you will *want* what you *get*. Ask, seek, knock: Do you want something from God? **ASK**. That's the first step ... feel free to ask. And are you willing to put some effort towards that for which you ask? Are you sincerely looking for solutions, guidance, answers? Then **SEEK**. Do you really mean business? Then **KNOCK!** *All* who ask will receive, *all* who seek will find, *all* who knock shall have doors opening up for them. Again, we may not always *get* what we *want*, but believe this good news ... we will *want* what we *get*, because our Father wants the best for us. We may not receive just what we ask, or find just what we seek, or discover on the other side of the closed door just what we hoped; but do ask, seek, knock ... habitually and faithfully.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 11, *"Which of you fathers, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?"* Matthew's gospel records Jesus also asking (see footnote), *"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"* (see footnote g on verse 11; some of the earlier manuscripts of Luke's gospel do include this question as well.) Fish and eggs and bread are contrasted with snakes and scorpions and stones. At first glance to our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, these appear to be rather random comparisons and contrasts. However, in that cultural context, they were not. Fish, eggs and bread were the ordinary food of the people residing in the area around the Sea of Galilee; these foods were pretty much the common basics of life necessities for nourishment. *First, Fish:* I'm told in the Sea of Galilee there was an eel-like fish called a barbut.<sup>1</sup> It could reach up to five feet in length and had a limited ability to crawl on land; it was very similar in appearance to a snake. However, it was among the "unclean" fish ... the eel-like creatures would be tossed back into the lake when caught in the nets, they were considered inedible. *Second, Eggs.* A scorpion at rest and all curled/folded up has a remarkable resemblance to an egg. Bite into that egg, though, and ouch! You'll be stung; you'll be poisoned. *Third, Bread:* Many of the round stones scattered all over the countryside of that region resembled a round loaf of bread in appearance. Bite into one of those loaf-stones, though, and you would break your teeth. You certainly wouldn't give that to your child if the child were to ask you for bread, unless you had a sadistic streak or a twisted sense of humor. Even if the child could somehow ingest it, it may fill the child's stomach, but it certainly would not nourish him or her. Jesus is intimating, *"You parents would not endanger your kids' welfare by giving them any of these things ... stones instead of bread, snakes for fish, scorpions instead of eggs ... but you would indeed be pleased to give your children the things they need whenever they ask."*

What is inferred, but not explicitly stated, is that sometimes children may indeed ask their parents for the equivalent of snakes, scorpions and stones. I'm a parent; I know ... children often plead and cajole and whine for things that can be harmful and even dangerous to their well being; they often don't know what things are "eggs" and what are "scorpions." An important part of being a parent is discerning a child's needs from a child's wants; in fact, one of the main objectives of parenthood is to get a child to *want* what s/he needs. And as children of God, we often don't know what things are stones and what things are bread, which are eggs and which are scorpions. Sometimes our undiscerning and conflicting desires get us asking for things, seeking after things, knocking the door down for things that really can wind up stinging us, poisoning us, breaking us. Jesus is making the obvious point that the God Who hears our requests loves us, and as our Heavenly Father He really does want the best for us.

According to Old Testament reading, though, there *are* times when we parents need to give that child a "stone" when that child asks for a stone. For that matter, it can be inferred that there are times when we need to give a child a "stone" when they are asking for "bread," i.e., when they are seeking to fulfill lesser appetites at the expense of much more important matters ... but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit.

<sup>1</sup> See

<https://books.google.com/books?id=mmz1Wm3XlvcC&pg=PA137&lpq=PA137&dq=barbut+sea+of+galilee&source=bl&ots=AwdqfDq6aG&sig=wwJM1qu-76plHhF2xMts9r-LRWM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjzp-DyyJbOAhUG7yYKHR3VBAGQ6AEILjAC#v=onepage&q=barbut%20sea%20of%20galilee&f=false>

In the Old Testament a stone often served as a semi-permanent memorial to some kind of miraculous divine encounter, a life-changing encounter with God. A stone memorial often marked a place where God's miraculous presence was seen, felt, encountered, experienced. Remember Jacob, who used a stone for a pillow one night? While he slept, he dreamed, and in his dream he saw what we've come to call Jacob's Ladder, angels ascending and descending up and down a staircase between earth and heaven. When Jacob awoke, he used that pillow-stone to mark the spot, to make a *memorial* to this experience. He named that place Beth El (*literally, House of God*). That memorial stone served as a visible reminder of Jacob's life-changing encounter with God that took place on that spot. In our reading today, it was not one stone, but twelve stones that were used in similar fashion. You may remember the story: It is finally time to enter the Promised Land, but the Jordan was at flood stage; the waters were so high the banks overflowed. But a miracle of God took place; God intervened and the waters parted just like they did forty years earlier at the Red Sea. After they had crossed, God directed that twelve strong men walk back out into the middle of that now-dry riverbed and pick up twelve large stones, carry them to shore, and erect a memorial, a monument to the occasion. The text is clear that God had the people erect the monument of stones not only for *their* remembrance, but for their children, and for the children who would follow after them, generation after generation after generation. Joshua 4:6, slightly paraphrased: *"When your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' You tell them what happened here!"* The stones here in Joshua were the monument marking God's very real divine involvement; they were the mute but eloquent testimony of God's reality and divine involvement in their lives.

*As a bit of an aside, I'm sure many of you are familiar with the Jewish custom of leaving a stone when visiting a grave; you can see small stones on most of the headstones in the Jewish cemetery by Post & Lincoln Roads nearby. The reasons for this are many and rooted in antiquity, but one obvious reason is that a stone simply serves as a visible memorial that someone was there to visit. And stones are certainly more practical and permanent and long-lasting than quickly-wilting cut flowers! The stone signifies the deceased has not been forgotten and the grave has recently been visited. In a somewhat similar sense, the stone memorials in the Old Testament are markers where God has visited; the stones mutely attest that God was present there, and that God has not forgotten His people.*

Now, our children do ask for bread. They have physical needs like adults, but they aren't yet able to accommodate or procure these things by themselves. They depend on you and me; they trust us parents to provide what they need. This isn't always the easiest of tasks, but any responsible parent knows it is the duty and privilege of parenting to provide for those needs. Few things are sadder than a parent who will not try to fulfill this basic obligation to provide for offspring. Children may ask for "stones" when they really need bread, but as we are reminded in the reading from Joshua, sometimes children ask for stones when they really want stones! More to the point, they ask *about* stones. They need stones. They need to see and experience real and solid and tangible memorials of God's reality in our lives. Their hunger for food and physical nourishment is equaled, and even surpassed, by their curiosity and hunger and *need* for solid spiritual understanding, for a vital faith and spiritual memories and a real hope that can sustain and inspire them throughout their lives. And parents are depended upon to do the primary providing; it is every bit as much a part of our parental duty as providing bread!

And one of our reasons for existence as a church, and doing things like offering Vacation Bible School, is to help all in the church family provide spiritual "stones" for our children, to help provide memorable and vital and substantial memories and experiences and "monuments" to the reality of God's love and grace. Bread meets the need and appetite of the moment while the kind of stone we are talking about meets the deepest needs and appetites of the moment *and* the needs and appetites of eternity. "Bread" is perishable while "stone" endures. "Stone" suggests substance and solidity, strength and security. There ought to be markers to show the reality of God in our lives, substantial markers that display God as a living reality in our lives. There ought to be some reminder to which our children can point and ask, "What does that mean?" *"Why do you pray, Dad?" "Why do you keep bringing us to church every week, Mom?" "Why do we go to church, anyway?" "Why are you always so, so honest when a little fib would save us a whole lot of trouble and hassle?"* All of these are variations of the one question: *"WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?"*

What our children really want to know is: *"What do these stones mean to US?"* They may be inquisitive about theology, but what they are really interested in hearing and seeing is TESTIMONY. They want to look at us and see a tangible reality of the wonderful grace of God and how it has worked and is working in our lives. They want and need to see faithful and rock solid testimonies to the reality of God in our lives. They want to see in us LIVING memorials of the reality of God. They want to see LIVING STONES. Children are looking to us; they are looking for some substantive reality, some marker of the God we believe in. They are looking for spiritual monuments: monuments like our faith, our character, our lifestyle, our love, our integrity, all of which come from our encounters with the living God. Our children are on a great spiritual quest of discovery and you and I, more than anyone else, must provide the markers and the milestones along their way. Let us provide stones, let them see in us and our lives living memorials to the reality of God's presence and vitality.

Yes, let's provide for our children's physical needs; feed them. But let us also be loving enough, responsible enough, caring enough, conscientious enough ... to "stone" them, as well.