

# STONE LOVE

Sermon, May 14, 2017

Texts: Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-11, I Peter 2:1-10

Those who know me know I'm something of a product of my generation, especially when it comes to seeing illustrations in the pop music of the sixties and seventies ... illustrations I've probably used a bit too often in past (*and present*) sermons, but all week long I couldn't get this particular song out of my head as I worked through the lectionary texts for today, so I gave in and made it my sermon title. "Stone Love" was a 1970 Motown hit by The Supremes, their last top ten hit, and their biggest hit without Diana Ross, who had left the group in January 1970 to pursue a solo career. The lyrics of "Stone Love" were directed at the social issues of the time, mainly the Vietnam War; it was a plea for the people of the world to end conflict and animosity. The lyrics, in part, which I won't sing for you at this time: *"Stone love, Oh yeah. A love for each other will bring fighting to an end ... Forgiving one another, time after time doubt creeps in. But like the sun lights up the sky with a message from above, Oh yeah, I find no other greater symbol of love. Yeah."* Lyricist Kinny Thomas (*who was the ripe old age of seventeen when he wrote the lyrics*) chose the term "stone love" to define the concept of something solid, substantial, lasting, unchanging ... the kind of solid and dependable and indestructible love, by the way, that every single person in this sanctuary this morning longs to experience; it's a universal human need. *"Stones are forever,"* said Thomas. *"They don't break or come apart. [That kind of] Love will be here forever."*

The song was originally written and recorded as "Stone Love," but during the process of mixing and releasing it somehow got mislabeled as "Stoned Love."<sup>1</sup> This led some to mistakenly think the song contained some kind of coded reference to drug use, and initially many radio stations across the country were apprehensive to play it. CBS even cut a live television performance of the song from a November 1970 episode of **The Merv Griffin Show** due to this misunderstanding. But no, the song did not refer to drug use or abuse. "Stone Love" (*not Stoned*) was the original title; again, "stone" was meant to be an adjective describing a love that was permanent, unchanging, solid, dependable as a rock (*for what it's worth, the Stylistics later used this connotation in their 1972 hit, "I'm Stone in Love With You."*)<sup>2</sup>

With all that said, hear again the words of Peter (*emphases added*): *"As you come to him, the LIVING STONE, rejected by men 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. 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. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.'" According to Peter, that's the "message from above" lighting up Peter's sky ... we are called to be living stones... people who are living, rock-solid, faithful, unshakeable, dependable and loving testimonies to the One Who IS Stone Love, the unchanging love of God personified, the Rock, the living stone, the cornerstone upon Whom we can build our lives.*

In Peter we read of *living* stones; in Acts we read of *lethal* stones in the martyrdom of Stephen. The lectionary text has us only reading the final few verses of a drama that takes place over two entire chapters of Acts; Acts 6 and 7. In these chapters we find a succinct and thorough summary and defense of the Christian faith given by Stephen, who is engaged in debate with a particularly zealous sect of Jews; the Synagogue of the Freedmen. I don't have time to really go into all the background,<sup>3</sup> but these were the ones who challenged Stephen, and Stephen embraced the challenge as an opportunity to share his faith. As Acts 6:10 tells us, *"... they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke."* Stephen's informed testimony and defense was so winsome, so engaging, so reasoned and so well thought through that they found themselves unable to defend their positions. So, finding themselves on the losing end of the debate, Stephen's opponents resort to some of the oldest political tactics in the book ... when you can't win the argument, demagogue the issues and just attack your opponent (*and if you pick up any newspaper or listen to just about any news program of late, you'll see the more things change, the more they stay the same ... but that's another sermon*). They used the lethal stones of their political and religious orthodoxy to just shut Stephen up. Well, we are called to be living stones that persuade and engage through the "stone love" we received from God; not lethal stones who pummel others into submission with our hard orthodoxy. Now, please hold that thought.

I have recited these words of Jesus from John's gospel at every funeral I have conducted the past thirty-three years: *"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die but have life everlasting."* *"You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were*

<sup>1</sup> (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2ce7FWOAM8>, turn up the speakers, sit back, enjoy, and listen carefully ... there just is no "d" on "stone.")

<sup>2</sup> (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j7qRCqvlIU> ... for those who don't know, you'll be surprised to see it really is a group of guys singing this song.)

<sup>3</sup> A little background, not delivered in the sermon: Synagogue of the Freedmen was a synagogue in Jerusalem made up mostly of those descended from Jews who had been captured by the Roman general Pompey and taken to Roman provinces in Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. Pompey found these Jews adhered so strictly to their religion and customs that they were troublesome slaves. They steadfastly refused to give in to the religion and customs of their captors, even on pain of death. As an eventual result, the Romans sent many of these Jews back to Jerusalem. It was the children and grandchildren of these freed slaves who made up the Synagogue of Freedmen, and they were probably THE most doggedly faithful Jews and were acutely sensitive to safeguard the sanctity of Judaism. . It's even possible Stephen was among their number before coming to faith in Christ, but that's not real clear.

*not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."* Over the centuries these words have brought great comfort to many who have faced death and/or have faced losing loved ones; these words have time and again brought great comfort to me ... this coming Thursday marks eighteen years since my wife went to the place our Lord Jesus had prepared for her. These promises of Jesus gave hope to her and to countless others who suffered through the hardship of their final days with debilitating physical conditions and sometimes a great deal of pain. To know our Risen Lord has gone before us through the veil of suffering and death, and has emerged risen and triumphant on the other side, never to die again, and to hear His promise that it will be same for us and that He goes before us to assure a place is being prepared there for us ... and then to hear Him reiterate, *"If it were not so, I would have told you!"* Those are wonderfully comforting promises that help take away the fear and sting of death and help give us a measure of solid and substantial peace (*"stone" peace, if you will*). As I recite these promises during funeral services, I often see faces lift and people snap to attention. Many of these promises are found in our Gospel text this morning.

The context for our reading from John 14 is that Jesus is preparing His friends for His departure. He tells them not to fear; He is going before them to prepare a place for them. While the disciples are trying to take all of this in, Jesus tells them they know the way to the place where He is going. It was Thomas who voiced the question everyone was silently thinking: *"Lord, we don't even know where you are going; how can we know the way?"* Jesus: *"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* Note two things: (1) Jesus was directly answering a specific comment when He said these words. When Thomas said, *"we don't know the way,"* Jesus responds, *"Thomas, yes you do! You know Me! And I am the Way. And I am the Truth; I will not lie to you. And I am the Life. And no one comes to the Father but through Me"* (2) When Jesus says *"no one comes to the Father but through Me,"* Jesus is not laying down a *condition* so much as He is simply stating a *fact*. He is simply stating a factual truth about Who He is. Jesus is God in the flesh; He is in the Father and the Father is in Him; to see Him is to see the Father; He and the Father are one. I want to say this carefully but clearly: Jesus is *not* saying here that unless one fully understands and accepts Who Jesus is, unless one understands Jesus as the Christian creeds name Him very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made, unless one understands all that AND claims Him as personal savior, then forget it, you'll never come to God. No, when Jesus says *"... no one comes to the Father but through me,"* that means one thing: it is a statement of fact about who He is; it is a statement of fact about His relationship with God. They are one, whether you believe that or not. When you come to God, you come to Jesus.

On a related side note, I'm convinced it is biblically consistent to believe (*and I'm in good company with CS Lewis and others on this*), that God, by His sovereign grace, can and will ultimately save through the work and merit of Jesus Christ some who may not have cognitively comprehended and/or acknowledged cognitively Jesus as the Christ in their earthly lifetimes, because (a) Jesus and the Father are one, and (b) the **sovereign** God we worship has the freedom to call and save whomever He chooses, however He chooses, whenever He chooses, even if they may not know it. Sometimes God speaks to people in surprising ways in order to move them to greater Truth. He starts right where they are in order to bring them where they need to be. For one biblical example, He did it with a group of Persian astrologers called Magi who followed a star to the birthplace of Jesus. Now, the Bible condemns astrology. But God spoke to those astrologers in their language ... in a star ... and brought them to bow before Jesus Christ. The God revealed in Jesus Christ has made it clear He will embrace anyone He chooses to embrace. How He does that, in what religious trappings He does that, or even if He does it outside of religion is really the business of a sovereign God whose ways are not our ways. That's His business. Grace is His initiative. We should know enough about God and His grace to know that He will be eminently fair and just and sovereign, and that He is not limited to our finite understanding and knowledge. God's ways are not always our ways. Grace is His initiative. After all, God's initiative embraced you! As I've mentioned before, I think the two most frequently asked questions in heaven are going to be: (1) "What are you doing here?" and (2) "Where's so and so?"

Now, my point is not to claim others really are Christian even if they don't know it. My point is certainly not to claim all religions are really saying the same thing, because the various religions are not all saying the same thing. That's silliness. Religions are not all "basically the same;" if you believe that, well, you really don't know your own religion, let alone other religions. All religions *don't* all teach the same worldview. They *don't* all counsel the same values. They *don't* all instill the same virtues. And they most certainly don't all proclaim an identical God. In the very little time remaining I want to say that my point is our calling is not to pummel others with our lethal stones of orthodoxy; our calling, our duty, is to be faithful, loving, living stones ... to be as faithful as we can to the life-giving God we know in Jesus Christ, to be faithful as we can in demonstrating the "stone love" of God to all who come our way. In short, I've learned to work on faithfully serving, living and loving ... especially loving ... and trusting God to do the saving and convincing. I don't spend a lot of time or energy trying to defend the truth claims of Christianity. There was a day when I did that, but not so much anymore. To be clear, it's not because I don't believe the truth claims; if anything, it's because I believe them all the more fervently, and I trust the Truth to win out. I DO spend a lot of time and energy trying to follow Jesus Christ, by the Book. And in doing so I want to do all I can to lovingly represent Jesus Christ, to get people to encounter the living Stone, the Corner Stone, Who is the full revelation of the "stone love" of God ... the One Who really is in every respect THE Way, THE Truth and THE Life.