

# STONING OUR CHILDREN

## Sermon, July 24, 2022

### Vacation Bible School Sunday

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

We sang as our Response of Praise that old classic, "Seek Ye First," the second stanza of which was drawn from 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 *all* who ask will receive, *all* who seek will find, *all* who knock shall have the door opened. Now, to be sure, we may not receive just what we ask for, 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* at the time, but you may soon discover that you will want what you get, because your Father loves you and wants what is best for you. **ASK, SEEK, KNOCK:** There's a logical progression here: Do you want something from God? **ASK.** That's the first step ... ask, and feel free to ask. And are you willing to put 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 find doors opening up for them.

Jesus goes on to say, *"What father among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone; or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?"* Bread, fish and eggs are contrasted with stones, serpents and scorpions. At first glance, these appear to be rather odd comparisons, but they aren't in that cultural context. Bread, fish, and eggs were the ordinary food of the people residing around the Sea of Galilee; pretty much the common basics of diet. *First, BREAD/STONES* -- Many of the round stones scattered all over the countryside of that region resembled a round loaf of bread. Bite into one of those loaf-stones, though, and you'll break your teeth! And you certainly wouldn't give that to your child if the child were to ask you for bread, unless you had a twisted sense of humor. *Second, FISH/SERPENTS:* In the Sea of Galilee there was an eel-like fish called a barbut. <sup>1</sup> Eels are similar in shape to serpents (*or snakes*). However, they were considered inedible; they were among the "unclean" fish ... the eel-like creatures would be tossed back into the lake when caught in the nets. *Third, EGGS/SCORPIONS.* A scorpion at rest and all curled up had a remarkable resemblance to a bird egg. Try to crack or eat that egg, though, and ouch! You'd be stung; poisoned. Jesus is intimating, *"You parents would not endanger your kids' welfare by giving them stones instead of bread, snakes instead of 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 stones, snakes, and scorpions. 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 grown-up 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 from our limited perspective what things are stones and what things are bread, eggs or scorpions, fish or snakes. Sometimes our undiscerning and conflicting desires and limited perspectives have us asking for things, seeking after things, knocking the door down for things that really can wind up stinging us, poisoning us, breaking us, afflicting us. So again, 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.

On a somewhat related note, however, according to our Old Testament reading, there *are* times when we parents do need to give that child a "stone" when that child asks for a stone. In the Old Testament a stone often served as a memorial to some kind of miraculous divine encounter, a life-changing experience with God. A stone memorial often marked a place where God's presence was seen, felt, encountered, experienced. Remember Jacob? While he slept, he dreamed, and in his dream he saw Jacob's Ladder, angels ascending and descending up and down a staircase between earth and

<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-76plHhF2xMIS9r-LRWm&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjp-DyyJbOAhUG7yYKHR3VBAQ6AEILjAC#v=onepage&q=barbut%20sea%20of%20galilee&f=false>

heaven. When Jacob awoke, he took the stone he had been using for a headrest and he marked the spot with it. He made a stone memorial and named that place Beth El (*literally, House of God*). That memorial stone served as a visible reminder of his life-changing encounter with God that took place on that spot. In today's Old Testament reading, it was twelve stones that were used in similar fashion. It was finally time for the Hebrews to enter the Promised Land after forty years of wandering, 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. God had the people erect the monument of stones not only for *their* remembrance, but for their children and their children's children. "*When your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' You tell them what happened here!*" The stones here in Joshua were a monument marking God's very real divine involvement; the mute but eloquent testimony of God's reality and divine involvement in their lives.

Now, our children do ask for bread, fish and eggs. They have physical needs, and they aren't quite yet able to get these things by themselves. They depend on you and me; they trust us parents to discerningly 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 basic needs ... few things are sadder than a parent who will not or can not fulfill the basic obligation to provide for offspring. And while children may ask for "stones" when they really need bread, we are reminded in the reading from Joshua, sometimes children ask for stones when they really need stones! More to the point, they ask *about* stones. They need to see and experience real and solid and tangible memorials of God's reality in our lives. They want to know about solid faith stories! They need stones. Their hunger for food and physical nourishment is equaled, and even surpassed, by their hunger and *need* for solid spiritual understanding, for a vital, rock solid faith, substantial 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! So, "stone" your children! "Rock" your kids!

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 "rock" our children, to provide such spiritual "stones" for our children, to help provide memorable and vital and substantial memories and "monuments" to the reality of God's love and grace. And there ought to be such markers in our own lives, substantial markers testifying that God is a living reality in our lives. Something 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? Why do you do this? Why do you believe that?*" 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 want to look at us and to us to see a tangible reality of the presence of God in our lives, they want to see tangible signs of a faith that *has* worked, *is* working and *will continue* to work. They want to see LIVING STONES. Be a "rock" star! Let them see in you LIVING AND SOLID memorials of the reality of God. Children are looking to us for spiritual monuments: monuments like our faith, our character, our lifestyle, our love, our integrity, our good actions ... all of which come from our vital encounters with God.

On a related note, if you've been in this congregation awhile, you'll know I've long been convinced that one of the most effective ministries of the church, and perhaps especially in ministry with young people, is to do all we can to provide *good* memories, happy memories, stone-y memories. Memories of service in mission, memories of healthy relationships, memories of good clean fun, wholesome and enjoyable activities, memories of loving, supportive, lasting friendships ... as well as rock solid memories of adults who love and encourage and nurture and build up, rather than bad memories of adults who misuse or abuse or discourage. Rock solid memories of singing such moldy oldies as "*Kum Ba Yah*" and "*Rise and Shine*", two songs that bring back a flood of happy memories for me beginning back in church camp 58 years ago, which is when I first learned these songs! In fact, one of the sadder and more difficult aspects of the pandemic years was all the memories that were NOT made with cancelled retreats and mission trips, cancelled SCHOOL, cancelled church events and canceled sporting events, proms, graduations, and having VBS on Zoom... so much of the reaction to Covid has proven to be so very damaging, but I digress. SO many life-changing memories are made in the course of a year. Time is precious; life is short, and it is meant to be lived ... and lived well and memorably.

Let us be loving enough, responsible enough, caring enough, conscientious enough, faithful enough to stone our children, let's rock our kids, let them see in our lives and let us help them experience in their lives living memorials to the reality of God's presence and love.