

LIVING STONES

Sermon, May 22, 2011

Texts: Psalm 31:1-5, Joshua 4:1-7, Matthew 7:7-12

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?" Jesus asks. "Or if he asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a snake?" Or, as Luke's account of this conversation records, "If he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" Bread, fish and eggs ... stones, snakes and scorpions. At first glance to our 21st century eyes, these appear to be rather random comparisons/contrasts. However, they were not. Bread, fish and eggs were the ordinary food of the people residing in the area around the Sea of Galilee; these foods were the basics of life necessities for nourishment. *First, 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. *Second, Fish:* In the Sea of Galilee there was an eel-like fish called a Barbut. 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. No self-respecting fisherman would even think of serving a Bar-B-Q Barbut for Breakfast or Brunch; nor would they feed Barbut to their Brood. *Finally, 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. 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*."

What is inferred, but not explicitly stated, is that sometimes children may indeed ask their parents for the equivalent of stones, snakes and scorpions. They often don't know what things are "eggs" and what are "scorpions"; they plead and cajole for things that can be harmful and even dangerous to their well being. 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 desires really can wind up stinging us, poisoning us, breaking us. Jesus is making the obvious point that God loves us, and as our Heavenly Father He really does know what is best for us. "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?" The answer appears obvious. Any decent parent would reply, "I love my child. Of course I wouldn't give him a stone!" Only a twisted mind would think of ever giving a child a rock, right?

Well, usually. But think again. What if a stone represented something more?

In the Old Testament a stone often represented something more. A stone often served as a mute memorial to some kind of miraculous divine encounter, a life-changing encounter with God. In our Old Testament reading today, it was not one stone, but twelve stones that were used in this fashion. After Joshua and the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land, twelve strong men shouldered the weight of twelve great stones from the spot where this new nation walked through a miracle. You may remember the story: It is finally time to enter the Promised Land. But first, they have to get across the Jordan, which is at flood stage; the waters are so high the banks are overflowed. But when the soles of the priests' feet touched the Jordan River, the waters parted just like they did forty years earlier at the Red Sea. So at God's direction, these men walked back out into the middle of that now-dry riverbed and hoisted these large stones to their shoulders, carried them to shore, and erected a memorial. When that special miraculous moment in time was long over, the twelve stones remained at that place as witness to the day when a people experienced a miracle of God. 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. 4:6, slightly paraphrased: "When your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' You tell them what happened here!" The stones were the monument marking God's very real divine involvement in human experience; they were the mute but eloquent testimony of God's reality and of His gracious deliverance.

Now, let's look again at Jesus' question and review. Our children do ask for bread. They depend on us for basic needs. They trust us to provide what they need. This isn't always the easiest of tasks, but any responsible parent knows it is the basic duty and obligation and privilege of parenting to provide those needs. Now, 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! Yes, they need bread, but they also need stones. They need to see and experience real and solid and tangible memorials to the reality of God. Their hunger for food and physical nourishment is equaled, and even surpassed, by their curiosity and hunger and *need* for solid spiritual understanding and experience. And again, parents are depended upon to do the providing. This is a crucial area

of parenting. More than once I've heard the comment (*fortunately, not here!*) from a well-meaning parent, "I don't bring my children to church. I want them to decide about such things for themselves when they are old enough to do so. I wouldn't presume to impose my personal faith on them." Such a parent may be providing bread, but s/he certainly is not fulfilling the obligation of providing stones. Go ahead and presume! This crucial, critical area of spiritual provision and nurture is every bit as much a part of our parental duty as providing bread!

As I mentioned in the early service last week, it is heartbreaking how so many today have grown up with no "stones" in their lives ... no tradition, no spiritual markers, no tangible reference points, no spiritual roots or foundations. They have grown up having received nothing of substantial and/or eternal value. These are people who grow up in "value neutral" environments, and do not even have values or traditions worth rebelling against. They are not in rebellion from the church, they are not in rebellion from religion, at least not consciously; there's just nothing there! And largely because nobody bothered (or was able) to provide it for them. While you and I work hard to meet the material needs and wants of our children, we mustn't short-change their spiritual needs. Again, the monument of stones was not only for those who crossed the Jordan, but for their children, and for the children who would follow after them, generation after generation. As those children grew and pursued their future, they were to have a spiritual sign post of the past from which to take their bearings. The stones from the river were a timeless symbol of God's presence and reality and His help in the lives of His people.

Let me ask: If our children ... the children in our families, and/or the children of our congregation ... should ask for a stone, some mark, some symbol of our encounter(s) with God, will we have anything to give? Or will we try to simply distract our children with some more bread, some more 'stuff', some more activity, because we aren't comfortable with trying to provide spiritual things? When a child is asking questions of spiritual importance, will you be able to address the spiritual need honestly and effectively, or will you try to avoid it with more attention to supplying just goods and services? Will we provide stones?

Bread meets the need of the moment while the kind of stone we are talking about meets the deepest needs of the moment *and* the needs of eternity. "Bread" is perishable while "stone" endures. "Stone" suggests substance and solidity, strength and security. In those critical and important moments when God takes an active part in our lives, there ought to be markers to show that God was at that experience, 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 major question: "WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?"

What our children really want to know is: "What do these stones mean to YOU?" They may be inquisitive about theology, but what they are really interested in hearing and seeing is TESTIMONY. They want to look at you and me and see a tangible sign of the wonderful grace of God and how it has worked and is working in our lives. They want and need to see living testimonies to the reality of God, living examples of what God has done. They want to see Living Stones.

Let's hear again the words of Peter, read earlier this morning: "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.' " And Peter continues later in the chapter: "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, we are to be living stones; living, breathing, solid, vocal testimonies to God's reality, people who declare God's praises.

I say this to those of us who are parents at any age to children of any age. The parent at age eighty still has opportunity to be a living stone, a beacon of faith, to a child of age sixty. My parents are in their late seventies, and they continue to be faithful, living stones in many, many ways to me; I still look to them for guidance, advice, inspiration, approval (*I call my dad on the phone and say, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume!" No, not really.*). For that matter, this message is directed to all of us, parents or not, all of us who are a part of this family of faith ... for every time we have a baptism here, we all make promises to be Living Stones for the children entrusted to our care as a church family. Children are looking to us, looking for the God Who lives and reigns in our hearts, they are looking for spiritual monuments: monuments like your faith, your character, your lifestyle, your love, your integrity, all of which come from your encounters with 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.

Yes, provide for your children's physical needs; provide bread. But let us be loving enough, responsible enough, caring enough ... to provide stones for them as well. Living stones.