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“Rejected Stones”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2012
Acts 4:5–12; Psalm 23; John 10:11–18

Part I: A River Runs Through It

The stone rejected by you, the builders, has become the cornerstone.

Peter is appropriating the words of Psalm 118:22 to the crucified and risen Jesus:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone, or capstone;

This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”

Peter misquotes it, however, adding “by you” to draw attention

and to implicate these adversarial Hebrew scholars who confront him.

I am fascinated by this concept of *rejection* coming at the culmination of

Peter's defense of the gospel before the Sanhedrin.

What other “stones,” besides Jesus, have been rejected in Scripture,

I wondered when I read this passage?

And to my amazement, the thread of rejection runs deep like a river

through Israel's history, dating back to Day One of their Red Sea delivery.

In 1 Samuel 8:7–8, Yahweh consoles Samuel, his prophet, when the people request that

he give them a king, saying, “It is not you (Samuel), that they have rejected,

but they have rejected *me as their king*. As they have done from the day

I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods.”

In 1 Kings 19:10, Elijah laments that “Israel has rejected *your (Yahweh's) covenant*,

broken down your altars and put your prophets to death.”

In a litany of woes from Isaiah 5:24, the prophet fingers both Israel and Judah

because “they have rejected *the law of the Lord Almighty*, and spurned *the word*

of the Holy One of Israel.”

Later, in Isaiah 53:3, they reject *God's messenger, God's suffering servant,*

“the one to whom the arm of the Lord has been revealed;
the one who is despised and rejected by humanity,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

And jumping forward into the New Testament, in John 3:36, John the Baptist says that

“whoever believes in the Son has eternal life,
but whoever rejects *the Son* will not see life.”

1 Thessalonians 4:8, the Apostle Paul admonishes believers that,

“those who reject *instruction* do not reject humanity, but *God,*
who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

In 1 Timothy 4:4, believers are reminded that “everything God created is *good*, and nothing
is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by
the word of God and prayer.

And finally, in 1 Peter 2:4, *Jesus* is referred to as the “living Stone”—

“rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.”

So to sum it up for you, as human beings, created by God with the
gift of free will, and the ability to make choices, for better or worse,
our propensity has been to use our gift of free will

to reject just about every good thing that God has ever given us – outright!

The list is self-evident and self-indicting; like spoiled and entitled children,

we have rejected God as our ruler, God's covenant, God's law,
God's messengers, God's suffering servant, God's word, God's instruction,
God's goodness, Jesus, the living Stone, and God's Son.

We don't talk a lot about original sin in our particular church context,

and if we do, we tend to take our cues from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*
and equate original sin with sexuality and desire.

But I can't help but thinking that this act of outright rejection

of just about every good gift that God has ever offered to us
is about as close to a definition of original sin as I can surmise.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of attending the bat mitzvah service for Lily Tendler,
the 13-year-old daughter of Susan Spratt and David Tendler.

And I was struck by one of the many prayers we prayed early in the service,
as we were just warming up for the reading of the Torah.

It was called a Kavvanah prayer, which in Judaism implies "intention."

This prayer was a prayer to be prayed at sunrise, thanking God
for all of the blessings that would come streaming our way
with the rising sun, that we might accept them and live a blessed day.

Can we do that? Can we be that open and accepting?

Can we accept the blessings that come to us in the form of God and neighbor?

Can we confess our tendency to reject the very best which God intends for us?



Part II: Rejected Stones

How does it feel to be rejected, to be a rejected stone?

I recall an incident of rejection, centered around one particular college interview
during my junior year in high school.

Young, excited about the possibilities of matching my achievements with the
expectations and offerings of this college,

I remember vividly planning and practicing for that interview:

picking out what I wanted to wear, how I wanted my hair to look;

preparing to speak about my course load and GPA,

about my extra-curricular activities and leadership positions

at school, at church and in the community;

about my interests and avocations outside of school;

and about my desires to continue my search for knowledge and wisdom

at the college level.

Needless to say, I was psyched, ready, anxious, and so hopeful.

I remember going in for that interview, shaking hands with the director of admissions,
feeling so good about my gifts, and confident about what I was

bringing to the table, which is saying a lot for me, a usually shy
and reserved person.

I remember it all in detail... I can recite for you, word for word,

the director of admission's initial words to me

after having taken a cursory glance at my transcript.

He looked up at me with his beady little eyes over the top of his reading glasses

and said, point blank, "Well, we only take the cream of the crop here, you know!"

He might as well have taken a gun, pointed it at my heart, and pulled the trigger.

The litany of retorts that crossed my mind, but not my lips, are legend.

They ran the gamut from:

Excuse me? I bet you wouldn't say that to me if I were Baptist,

or if my parents were major contributors to your school, or if I were male!

I know for a fact you don't take the cream of the crop from
any of those applicant pools.

Or

I wouldn't apply to your tookey school now if you paid me to come here.

Or

I wouldn't pull for this college, even if you won the national championship.

Or

You can just take this school and... well, you know... the list goes on.

He babbled on for a while about protecting his school's excellent academic reputation,

and shortly thereafter, I picked up my transcript, exited the building,

and never bothered to apply there.

I was hurt. I felt rejected. I was angry that he never even gave me a chance

to present myself or to advocate for my admission.

To this day, it still bothers me.

It is interesting, in retrospect, that I don't remember any of my other college interviews

half as well as I remember that one.

Rejection sears itself into our psyches indelibly and makes us think terrible thoughts

that we don't want to think otherwise, doesn't it?

I imagine every one of us knows how it feels to be rejected;
when what we cherish and crave so very deeply as human beings is to be accepted
without having to compromise who we really are and the values we hold dear.

Our FPC middle school youth had a session last weekend with their parents
about sexuality and sex in today's world,
and I heard that one of the greatest concerns voiced by parents at that meeting
is the fear that their youth will compromise their beliefs
in order to avoid rejection; that they will use sex to gain acceptance,
which is a very valid concern. It is worrisome.

Some of you are college grads now, gifted with an excellent education
and excited about taking it to the next level, either in graduate school
or in a well-paying job. But it's just not working out the way
you thought it would. Doors are closing for you, not opening.

Our son, Stuart, has applied to 18 medical schools for next year,
and he has been turned down by 17 thus far. He's not used to being rejected,
and it's bothersome to him, I can tell.

What can I say to him to keep him hopeful, to keep his confidence up,
to let him know that his gifts will be appreciated somewhere – soon?

Others of you might know how it feels to have a spouse reject you
after many years of marriage,
opting for a more exciting partner, perhaps. It is deeply painful.

The state of North Carolina is in the process of voting on legislation that will
de-legitimize, which is the legal term for reject,
a segment of the population from accessing benefits,
just as we once de-legitimized a whole race of people. It hurts.

Some of you know how it feels to be rejected, laid-off, pink-slipped, from the job you loved,
the one for which you've given your blood, sweat and tears,
the one from which you had hoped to retire. It cuts deep.

Some of you know how it feels to be passed over for a promotion, a raise, tenure,
or the opportunity to have your employment level raised after many years
of loyalty to one company or institution. It stings.

It makes you feel diminished. It makes you feel like you've wasted your time there.
Some of you know how it feels to be rejected by a sister or brother,
someone who grew up with you in the same household,
someone with whom you shared parents, meals, schools,
vacations, grandparents, pets, but who now wants nothing
to do with you, your family, or your children. It really hurts.
I know, because you tell me these stories. I can see it in your eyes.
I can see the color rise in your neck when you talk about it,
the glint from the tears welling up in your eyes.
How does Jesus, the Living Stone, the One chosen and precious to God
but rejected by humanity, by us, inform our faith
when we experience unbearable rejection?
How can his rejection by humanity heal us of this debilitating affliction?



Part III: The Cornerstone

Isaiah, the prophet, uses shepherd imagery to convey the good tidings to Zion,
the promise of redemption to God's people who cry out for comfort and healing.

"He will tend his flock like a shepherd," Isaiah says.

He will *gather* the lambs in his arms and carry them close to his heart;

He will gently lead those that have young." (Isaiah 40:11)

To a man who has been crippled since birth,

gathered and carried by his friends to the gate called "Beautiful" in Zion,

Peter and John offer healing, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, alone.

The verb for to heal, in Greek, *SWZW*, can have a wide context of meanings,

healing, rescue, spiritual wholeness, or salvation.

Peter and John rescue and heal the man of his affliction.

They restore spiritual wholeness to the man in his affliction.

They save the man from social rejection and isolation.

And they proclaim the good news boldly to the people:

that all of this comes through Jesus, whose name also means "he saves,"

that all of this comes through Jesus, raised from the dead,

to resurrect the dead... *and* to offer new life, healing, and wholeness to the living.

The powerful council of the Sanhedrin arrests Peter and John and puts the squeeze on them.

Who is in control here, they insist on knowing: these manic street preachers
or their dominant religious institution?

The key word that rubs like a stone in their Sanhedrin sandals is this: power.

In whose name is the power to heal?

In whose name is the power to turn a dead-end life around?

In whose name is the power to resurrect people from rejection,

which is death in one direction, and redirect their lives in new ways?

In whose name is the power to remove the sting from rejection

and foster forgiveness amidst hurt and anger?

In whose name is the power to take the high road

and not let hurt or anger govern the way we, hereafter, treat people
who have turned away from us?

In whose name is the power of the church to gently lead those who feel

alienated, broken-hearted, disappointed, separated, rejected and set-apart,
and gather us together, close to the heart of God,

in unity, harmony, goodness, peace, justice, and renewed purpose,

in spite of our propensity to reject these very gifts freely offered by God?

Peter and John know that the power lies beyond themselves.

The power, they proclaim, is in the name of Jesus, alone,

"by which *we* must be saved." Their plural pronoun *we*
includes their denouncers, too.

Their plural pronoun *we* offers acceptance to adversaries.

The stone the builder has rejected has become the cornerstone,

through him who saves, heals, rescues and makes us whole again by his grace.

The One himself despised and rejected says, "And when I am lifted up from the earth,
I shall draw everyone to myself" (John 12:32).

And as Bishop Desmond Tutu says, "He hangs from His cross

with outflung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything,
in a cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone and everything belongs.
None is an outsider, all belong.”

(Desmond Tutu. *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 265)

All are accepted in the embrace of the risen Lord.

In the name of Jesus, our Rock and Redeemer,
rejection can be overcome and true acceptance found.

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the rejection/sin of the world.

Amen.