

What Do We Build as Living Stones?

Friends (long-time and new), let us wonder together both in worship on this fifth Sunday of Easter and as we gather later for a special congregational meeting: What Do We Build as Living Stones? Let us pray.

God of resurrection power, you are our rock of life and love. Send your Spirit into each of our lives today to comfort us and challenge us to follow in the way of your risen Christ. In all the opportunities we encounter as individuals and as a community, grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Stone people. Have you ever heard of rocks understood to be stone people? This past week, I found myself in conversation with a friend who draws on the wisdom of shamanic teachings in her practice as a clinical psychologist. In shamanic traditions, rocks as “stone people,” refers to their identity as keepers of the knowledge and wisdom of Earth. Rocks came first and before other members of creation such as plants, trees, animals, humans. Humans in many times and spaces have gathered rocks in circles (as depicted in the art on our bulletin) in order to connect with the wisdom of rocks.

Today, our epistle reading from St. Peter reminds us of our call as Christians to find in the risen Christ the cornerstone for our foundation of faith in a living, loving God. I invite us to take a moment to remember and appreciate the history of our three physical cornerstones in this People’s Congregational Church building. But the story begins a bit before the first cornerstone in this building.

In 1879, when Bayport was known as South Stillwater, a small clapboard church called Union Church was erected and opened to anyone who wanted to worship, regardless of denomination.

By 1916, enough people were coming regularly that we wanted to become affiliated and strengthened by participation with a denomination – one of the predecessor bodies of the current National Association of Congregational Christian Churches

Our first cornerstone in this space was placed in 1938 underneath our bell tower. In 1938 the original chapel was torn down and this new church building was completed and dedicated in this space. Our sanctuary is designed in the shape of a cross with a stained-glass window depicting the ministry of Christ as the focal point.

Our second cornerstone in this space was placed in 1956. Our growing church added an education wing wrapped around the original building and a fellowship hall below.

Over the years, we added a pipe organ, more stained glass, and other forms of beauty.

Our third cornerstone in this space was placed in 1994 when we added the narthex and an elevator for increased physical accessibility to fellowship on both levels of this building.

I feel deep within me the Holy Spirit's presence as expressed through the words of a song called "Mark this Place," by Bryan Sirchio. He draws on the story of our ancestor in faith, Jacob, who wrestled with God in a dream at a liminal changing moment in his life between places. He was on the run. I invite you to close your eyes if that is an effective way for you to receive these words. Sirchio writes:

*Find a stone like Jacob, and mark this place
Surely God's been with us here
And some day when we return, we'll remember things we learned
By God's grace, mark this place*

*As we journey through our lives, there are places, there are times
Where the Spirit seems to touch us in ways that change it all
Holy places, holy ground, Holy Spirit all around
Place where we seem to hear God call*

*There are places where the veil that can seem to separate
Things of God from things of this world becomes so very thin
That we sense God passing through; making promises anew
Speaking words God knows we need to hear*

*Find a stone like Jacob, and mark this place
Surely God's been with us here
And some day when we return, we'll remember things we learned
By God's grace, mark this place*

This place has been marked by all of us and beloved and I invite you to consider marking other holy, sacred spaces in your life as well. I do want to ask this morning if anyone came to this building for a first time in the 1930s – would you raise your hand? How about the 1940s? The 1950s? The 1960s? The 1970s? The 1980s? The 1990s? The 2000s? The 2010s? And the 2020s? And we have all marked this place.

Let us listen to the Psalmist. We heard and read:

“Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me... Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love....” (Ps. 31:3-4, 15-16)

In a song entitled “Let Us Shout for Joy” (inspired by Psalm 95), a friend of mine, singer songwriter Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, refers to God as the rock of love, singing,

“Let us shout for joy to the rock of love... the one who holds the Earth... for we know that we belong to God who loved us from our birth.” Mark the sacred spaces with a rock that reminds you of God’s love with you on the journey.

We also heard from the epistle of St. Peter:

“Come to [Jesus], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:4-5)

This passage from St. Peter is very tricky because it has been weaponized as supersessionist – as a way of saying that the Jewish people have gotten it wrong (this is the way to be chosen, this is the way to be right with God). But truly it honors all of God’s creation. “Be a holy priesthood” – a priest is one who is a channel for others of the love of God. And those come in all cultures, in all spaces and times. And each of us can be priestly toward one another in channeling the love of God. It goes on to say:

“...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of [the one] who called you out of darkness into [God’s] marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

One of my favorite quotes from a theologian says that Jesus was the way who was radically open to other ways as well. And so each of us is chosen for our own specific embodiment of the love of God.

This spring, our Justice and Outreach Team and co-conspirators are leading us in quarterly mission (that is, learning, funding and action) focused on land recognition and stewardship. Leaders launched the mission last Sunday by teaching us what they have begun to learn about indigenous stories of the land we know and love as People’s Park.

Expanding our understanding of indigenous stories of the land in timely and essential for us. *[pause for bell tolling]* Expanding our understanding of indigenous stories of the land and peoples who have been with the land in timely for us because our Park Improvement Task Force is leading us in developing a plan for improving physical accessibility and defining and making more visible our park while continuing to walk gently with the land as part of honoring its complex ecology, deep wisdom, and beautiful life.

It is important to note that, as with the work of our Antiracism Collective in 2021 and 2022, we move faithfully as highly privileged and non-oppressed people by starting our journey in any area of injustice with self-education. We will also welcome guest teachers from oppressed and vibrant native-led organizations in May and June to speak with us at People's Park. One of our guest teachers will come to us in the form of written word. People's Book Club will read Robin Wall Kimmerer's 2013 book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, discussing it across two gatherings in early and mid-June. The subtitle is "Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants."

Returning to shamanic traditions, after the stone people came the plant people (that is, vegetation), then the standing people (that is, trees), followed eventually by animals and humans – five differently beautiful groups of people, all of us vital members of creation.

To whet your appetite to join us in our June book study, the synopsis of *Braiding Sweetgrass* includes these words:

"As a botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer has been trained to ask questions of nature with the tools of science. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers.

In Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer brings these lenses of knowledge together to show that the awakening of a wider ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgement and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. For only when we can hear the languages of other beings are we capable of understanding the generosity of the [E]arth and learning to give our own gifts in return."

Returning to stones marking places in our lives, I'd like to share with you the story of the stone I shared with our child Maya. A man named Cañizares gave me that stone. I was 18 years old and on a trip of five or six days across a wide swath of the Dominican Republic when I was an exchange student. When all of my high school senior Dominican friends and I got back in our bus after a stop, Cañizares came around as our guide with a large gunny sack full of stones and said, "take one out – take just the first one your hand reaches." And when we stopped later that day on a cliff overlooking the ocean, he spoke with us about how the rest of the Earth moves around the stones. The smooth stones at the edge of the ocean have been through so much interaction with so many other beings of the world. And he explained to us how we would face many challenging experiences in our live and that they would teach us and smoothen us – grow in us even deeper wisdom over the years. So I cherish that stone. I keep it with me wherever I go.

I encourage you to find your stone, mark many sacred places and moments in your life. Let us learn from the stone people how to be. Love it counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
May 7, 2023 (5th Sunday of Easter, special congregational meeting)
Psalm 31:1-5,15-16; 1 Peter 2: 2-10