

**Readings:** Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

A pastor and good friend of mine was giving a sermon once and the topic turned towards all the evils of alcohol. The pastor got so worked up about the issue that to emphasize his point he shouted out, “You know, if I had all the alcohol in the whole world, why I’d just dump out *every last drop of it* in the river.” The pastor sat down, feeling good about the point he’d made, as the song-leader got up with a curious look on her face when she saw the song that was planned next. Not really knowing what to do she shrugged her shoulders and much to the chagrin of the pastor said, “Let us sing together song 423, *Shall We Gather at the River.*”

Even though we make light of it, of course, alcohol can have devastating effects. Tearing apart families. Leaving lives in shambles. But, for the most part, I wonder if you wouldn’t agree – used in moderation, not abused, for *most individuals* though not all – alcohol has the potential to enhance life.

All of our readings today center around, I think, two other things which have the potential for devastating effects, but also have the potential to enhance life – probably even more so than alcohol. They are two things summed up in the childhood nursery rhyme: “Sticks and stones may break my bones,” we say, “but words will never hurt me.”

It makes for a good rhyme, doesn’t it? But anyone who’s ever known the sting of harsh words from a loved-one, let alone an “enemy,” knows that stones and broken bones certainly hurt, but *words* have the potential too, to cut to the heart.

Words and stones. They have the potential to be used to build-up, to comfort, to inspire as well as to tear-down, to ruin, and to wound. Take our second reading from First Peter, a letter which it seems was originally mailed to, “the exiles in Dispersion.” That is, these are words directed to refugees far from home, maybe with no home to return to. Peter writes:

...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...  
[because, the letter goes on to say,] ...you are...God's own people...  
Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

I don't know about you, but I often find it difficult to take a complement. There are, after all, a million ways to shrug it off. And so, I wonder if at least one of the invitations in Peter's words about stones, is an invitation to remember this good news...

It's an invitation which begs us to take the stone walls we sometimes build around our hearts to prevent not only complements, but also the good news from breaking-down our hearts of stone. It's the good news that we (that *you!*) are one of *God's own people*. That *you* have been created in God's own image. That you are each like a single stone, when assembled together – make a church where mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love dwell.

Of course words and stones can get you in trouble and be troubling. Stephen learns this all too well in our first reading. Stephen spoke *words of challenge* to his fellow people. Stephen – not unlike the long tradition of prophets from the Old Testament – challenges the people, “You are the ones who received the law, and yet you have not kept it.”

We often *build a wall of stone around hearts* – not only to keep out complements and good news – but also *to prevent any word of challenge or criticism from reaching our hearts...* Before Stephen's words of challenge can reach their hearts of stone, the people become enraged, drag him out of the city, and take stones against him *even as he continues to pray words of comfort* which fall on stopped ears – “Do not hold this sin against them.”

Religion at it's best, *the church* at its best – builds up. Literally the word “Religion” is related to the word “ligament,” it means “to bind together again.” Like an old stone house that's fallen into disrepair, religion should remind us of the comforting (and sometimes challenging word!) that God binds us up together again in a home that provides comfort and safety... then sending us out to do the same kind of repair work in a world that desperately needs it.

Of course, I've been preaching for several minutes now and maybe you've noticed I haven't even said a word about our Gospel reading. I must admit, I have a kind of “hesitancy” about the reading. It might or might not surprise you, but my hesitancy centers on that phrase which is probably the most familiar: “Jesus said to Thomas, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*”

Perhaps you wonder why a pastor, someone who has (in a way) committed his life to the teachings of Jesus, would be troubled by these words of Jesus. To be honest, I'm not troubled when they come out of Jesus' mouth, but they trouble me the way they've been spoken by many. Like the stones that took Stephen's life or at the very least to tear down, rather than to build up.

Maybe you've encountered folks who mean well, but who say to you, "Have you given your life to Jesus? After all he is the way, the truth, and the life. You're not saved unless you believe in him. Do you believe in Jesus and do you believe that Jesus saves you from your sins?"

They're honest questions and I respect them. But it sometimes seems a bit backwards to me. Didn't Jesus give his life for us? Doesn't Jesus believe in us so much more than we'll ever believe in Jesus? To put it bluntly, if Jesus was about the kind of God who sends "believers" to heaven and our brothers and sisters who are Jewish or Muslim, agnostic or even atheist straight to hell... wouldn't the conversation in our Gospel reading for today have played out differently than it does?

The conversation takes place between Jesus and his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. And they seem to me to be words of compassion and comfort to disciples who are lost. I hear the disciples tell Jesus, "We've got no clue how to get to the Father. We're lost. We're like refugees without a home. Just show us God already. Just show us how to believe."

What if we – following the lead of the disciples, following the lead of people who were *right there with Jesus through his death and life* – began worship this way... acknowledging where we got lost along the way this week? Acknowledging the difficult time we've had seeing God's presence among us this month? And then waiting for a word of comfort, maybe even challenge from the Word of God.

It seems to me that one of the greatest challenges of this decade if not this century – but also one of the greatest opportunities – is to find a way to affirm two things at once...

First, as individuals and as a community of faith. To say, as our text does today, that "Yes, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life... for me as an individual, for us as a community of faith." To say that we see in the teachings, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus "enough" to find a way to God.

But to also affirm a second thing, *at the same time!* That even though Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life for me and for us... we also affirm that our brothers and sisters who are Jewish or Muslim, agnostic or even atheist, are carved from the same stone we are. They are “created in the image of God,” to use our own language. And to insist that God would not turn God’s back on God’s own creation. And that perhaps they too are doing the best they can to find their “way” in this world. And that maybe, just maybe, they too have “enough” to find their “way” in a maze-like world.

It doesn’t mean that we minimize the power that Jesus has had and *does have* to transform our lives – revealing a way to God, where we thought there was “no way.” It only means, we work to find a way at the very least to affirm our faith, without tearing-down, weighing-down, or (put bluntly) “stoning” our brothers and sisters who claim other “ways.”

It’s a challenge to say the least. I won’t say it’s easy. But I think it’s also a great opportunity – to begin with our own hearts long before we turn to the hearts of others. For me it’s mysteriously at the center of the good news, the comforting and challenging words of Christ Jesus. The words that bind us together again like living stones. The words that give us hope. The words that truly are the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.