

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2023

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FIFTH SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 34)*

One: "I will bless the Lord at all times."
All: **"God's praise shall continually be in my mouth."**
One: "O magnify the Lord with me."
All: **"O taste and see that the Lord is good."**
One: Come, let us worship the God of grace...
All: **...The God of resurrection and new life!**

***OPENING HYMN** "Christ Is Risen! Shout Hosanna!" GtG 248

1. **Christ is risen! Shout Hosanna!**
Celebrate this day of days!
Christ is risen! Hush in wonder:
all creation is amazed.
In the desert all-surrounding,
see, a spreading tree has grown.
Healing leaves of grace abounding
bring a taste of love unknown.
2. **Christ is risen! Raise your spirits**
from the caverns of despair.
Walk with gladness in the morning.
See what love can do and dare.
Drink the wine of resurrection,
not a servant, but a friend.
Jesus is our strong companion.
Joy and peace shall never end.
3. **Christ is risen! Earth and heaven**
nevermore shall be the same.
Break the bread of new creation
where the world is still in pain.

(continued...)

**Tell its grim, demonic chorus:
"Christ is risen! Get you gone!"
God the First and Last is with us.
Sing Hosanna, everyone!**

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

O Lord, we want to shout your praise, yet all too often our song is but a faint echo. Our words of commitment ring hollow. Our deeds do not follow your example. Our lives are empty of your grace. Forgive us, gracious and tender God. Cleanse us of our selfish tendencies, and fill us anew with your love. Reclaim us and remake us as your own people. For it is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: Christ has transformed us. Christ has renewed us.
All: **Through Christ's death and resurrection, we are a new creation, ready to sing God's glory and testify to God's grace.**
One: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.
All: **Thanks be to God!**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**
(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Acts 7:54-60
I Peter 2:2-5,9-10

ACTS 7:54-60 (New Revised Standard Version updated edition)

⁵⁴ *When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.* ⁵⁵ *But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* ⁵⁶ *"Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Humankind standing at the right hand of God!"* ⁵⁷ *But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.* ⁵⁸ *Then they*

dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

I PETER 2:2-5, 9-10 (New Revised Standard Version updated edition)

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ 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. ...

⁹ But 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.

*¹⁰ 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.*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Throwing Stones...or Being One" by Pastor Bill Vincent

They were angry. They had had enough: had enough with all the speaking and preaching, the accusations and 'truth'...or whatever. They had heard enough.

They were angry, defensive. Time to shut up this blowhard, teach him a lesson. So they struck back. They picked up stones and struck back.

I don't know about you, but, unfortunately, I can identify with them. Feeling accused, blamed. And my defenses go up, and I want to strike back.

And we start to throw stones, using deception and insult to slander and harass mercilessly.

Tell a person long enough and loud enough and consistently enough, and they will come to believe that they are worthless.

And we throw stones with our words.

Ever overhear someone say something cutting, biting, not pleasant (and not true) about you?

Then you will know the bruises of the stones of death.

We throw stones with our deeds.

I was coming home on the interstate once. I had just passed a vehicle. Then they sped up and pulled alongside me. The passenger 'flipped me the bird', then he and the driver laughed and went on.

Or ever have someone completely ignore you, as if you are not there, don't exist, don't matter?

Then you know the weight of the stones of death.

We throw stones with our life-style.

Like the one who completely disregards the needs and plight of others, cares not a whit about the ramifications of their actions and choices and lifestyle on others, its effect on others.

With disdain for the welfare and well-being of others, we throw trash out our car window, not caring about how it might affect others.

And a woman seeks to better herself and affirm her self worth, and a man rapes his own wife to "put her in her place."

We know of stones of lead propelled by gun powder and stones of shrapnel propelled by the explosive force of bombs.

There are literal deaths from all sorts, shapes, and sizes of stones. And the bodies lie scattered around us.

And there are all sorts of other, figurative deaths, often just as painful and destructive.

And stones of death fly

-with every word spoken with venom and every deed guided by vengeance that tears at the fragile fabric of the human soul;

-with every choice we make that degrades someone or belittles another, that calls into question the God-given worth of a fellow human being.

We throw these stones ourselves. And we have them thrown at us.

And they leave us numb, unfeeling. They bruise our capacity for community, for compassion. They bludgeon our ability to care and trust, to love. They dole out death to our heart and soul.

Ironic that, in our story from Acts, it is precisely Stephen's message about the good news of Jesus Christ and God's love that convicts the people of their throwing stones, and that elicits their rage.

Yet such is not always the case. Sometimes our response comes from jealousy, or fear, or selfishness.

Yet whatever the reason, this is not what God desires.

What God desires is for us not to throw stones, but to become stones...of life: living stones.

Now, I don't know about you, but I can identify with throwing stones.
But I'm not sure I know how to become a living stone...though perhaps I may recognize it when I see it.

Like when a group knits blankets for the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit so that these premies, struggling to grow and survive, can sense, in their own way, that someone cares for them.

Or when someone stands up to a bully on someone else's behalf: putting themselves in the path of stones of death in order to embody their care and concern.

Or when someone notices a student struggling with school, be it math or reading, and offers to provide tutoring so the student can learn and grow, and feel better about themselves. (And know they are not alone).

Or like neighbors helping neighbors, near or far: lending a helping hand in the midst of yet another tornado's destructive wake or flood waters washing away someone's whole life.

I remember hearing a story of a woman who was in a concentration camp during World War II. She was pregnant at the time. One of her guards was a kindly soul, and, knowing her need for good nutrition, smuggled an orange into her cell. It was meant for her, and for the health of her unborn child. Yet she took that orange and, section by section, parceled it out among her cellmates.

Even as the air around her was thick with the stones of death – with the deprivation and dehumanization of a concentration camp – she (and this kindly guard) became a living stone for life.

Nowadays, life for us may not be as oppressive as a concentration camp, but the air around us is still thick with stones of death.

And in the midst of a culture and society cluttered with stones of death, we are to be transformed into living stones – not only personally but as a community – to build up each other, and others: in the understanding of God's love, in commitment to God's way, in heeding Christ's call. Building one another up as the people God intends us to be: building blocks of the kingdom of God, signposts of the reign and presence of God.

Stones that not only know life themselves, but share it, too, so that those who come in contact with these stones are not bruised and battered but healed and made whole.

How do we become living stones? What's the process?

I remember being taught about the three different kinds of rock.

First there is igneous rock: formed from out of a volcano from the cooled magma, from the hot lava.

Now heat may indeed have something to do with this process.

But I don't think God wants us to blow our tops, like some volcanoes.

Then there is sedimentary rock.

Note: I did not say 'sedentary', lying around like spiritual couch potatoes.

But sedimentary, as in 'layers'.

That may be on target. Layers of personality. Layers of growth: it's a process, becoming this living stone.

Perhaps metamorphic rock, though, is the best image.

Taking another type of rock and, through applying a lot of heat and pressure, creating a new rock: a metamorphosis, a transformation.

Metamorphic rock.

Heat and pressure. An apt description of life, of this process. The woman in the concentration camp could certainly identify. So would the community addressed by Peter's letter. And Stephen, for that matter. A situation of persecution and stress: ridicule, harassment, slander; a hostile environment; going against the prevailing norms and manner of society.

Yet through this process, being pressed, shaped, polished into living stones to proclaim the grace and goodness of God.

And, of course, one of the greatest and most notable examples of this transformation from throwing stones to becoming one is Saul himself, whom we tend to know as 'Paul'. His own experience: being imprisoned, beaten, stoned, run out of town. Yet all the while sharing the good news – and life – of God's love.

Sounds scary, this metamorphosis through heat and pressure. Yet we need to remember the grace of God.

God is present, through Christ and even the cross

For we who once were nobodies, are now God's people.

We who once, in throwing stones ourselves, showed no mercy, now are people of mercy, for we know God's mercy.

Perhaps it will be helpful, too, to remember this image:

That through the heat and pressure of life – from whatever source – if we are faithful and persist, the dark, black, dull lump of coal is transformed into a bright, clear, brilliant diamond, that dances with light, that is alive with the fire within, that shines, reflecting the glory and goodness of God.

May God produce a diamond – a living stone – out of me, and out of you.

***HYMN** "Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak" GtG 722

**1. Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
in living echoes of your tone.**

**As you have sought, so let me seek
your erring children, lost and lone.**

(continued...)

2. **O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet.
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
your hungering ones with manna sweet.**
3. **O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
the precious truths which you impart.
And wing my words that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.**
4. **O fill me with your fullness, Lord,
until my very heart o'erflow
in kindling thought and glowing word,
your love to tell, your praise to show.**
5. **O use me, Lord, use even me,
just as you will, and when, and where
until your blessed face I see,
your rest, your joy, your glory share.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.**

**The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.**

**In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

(continued...)

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: God of resurrection...

All: ...hear our prayer.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

With joy we celebrate your power and presence, O Lord. Thank you for your guidance of us. Thank you for your providing for us. Thank you for your love to us. May we, in our thoughts and words and deeds, proclaim you Lord of all. Use us and our gifts to proclaim your glory and further your kingdom. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: **And also with you.**

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: **We lift them to the Lord.**

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

(The prayer continues...)

The Lord's Prayer (Contemporary)

(next page...)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(With the passing of the bread, please wait until all have been served so that all may partake together, reflecting our unity in Christ.)

Sing: “Feed Us, Lord” GtG 501

**1. Feed us, Lord.
Feed us, Lord.
In the broken bread,
be revealed again.
Come and feed our hearts, O Lord.**

**3. Fill us, Lord.
Fill us, Lord,
with the bread and wine
of the risen Christ.
Come and fill our hearts, O Lord.**

(With the passing of the cup, please partake as soon as received as an expression of our personal relationship with Christ.)

**2. Quench us, Lord.
Quench us, Lord.
On this thirsty ground,
may your love flow down.
Come and quench our hearts, O Lord.**

(continued...)

**4. Lead us, Lord.
Lead us, Lord,
nourished here by Christ,
given strength for life.
Come and lead our hearts, O Lord.**

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Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples” GtG 757

- 1. Today we all are called to be
disciples of the Lord,
to help to set the captive free,
make plowshare out of sword,
to feed the hungry, quench their thirst,
make love and peace our fast,
to serve the poor and homeless first,
our ease and comfort last.**

- 2. God made the world and at its birth
ordained our human race
to live as stewards of the earth,
responding to God's grace.
But we are vain and sadly proud;
we sow not peace but strife.
Our discord spreads a deadly cloud
that threatens all of life.**

- 3. Pray justice may come rolling down
as in a mighty stream,
with righteousness in field and town
to cleanse us and redeem.
For God is longing to restore
an earth where conflicts cease,
a world that was created for
a harmony of peace.**

(continued...)

4. **May we in service to our God
act out the living word,
and walk the road the saints have trod
till all have seen and heard.
As stewards of the earth may we
give thanks in one accord
to God who calls us all to be
disciples of the Lord.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

All: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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