Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Ecclesiastes 3:5a
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A Time to Scatter and Gather Stones

Who doesn't like skipping stones?

When you're near a body of water, especially one with a beach full of flat rocks, it's almost impossible not to pick a few up and chuck them into the water. Right? I'm not very good at it, but it sure is fun.

Here's a fun fact. The Guinness World Record for the number of skips in a single throw is 88, set by Kurt "The Mountain Man" Steiner in 2013. Eighty-eight times! I'm lucky if I get three. Sometimes my stones seem to skip the water altogether and head straight for the bottom.

This summer, I went to the Washougal River to throw a few stones of my own. But this time, I had a purpose.

At the beginning of my sabbatical, I was feeling weighed down by the heaviness of ministry. Over twenty-five years, you can carry a lot of burdens: deaths, illnesses, tragedies, toxic politics, COVID, difficult conversations, and disappointments. When you spend your life walking alongside people through difficult seasons, some of that weight stays with you.

So, on a beautiful day in May, I took some flat rocks and a Sharpie, wrote on them whatever came to mind, and took them to the river. I prayed over each rock, asking God for healing and release. Then I threw them into the river, never to be picked up again.

I thought about the words of Jesus:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."[1]

I needed to acknowledge what I had been carrying, bring it before God, and let it go. I believe that was part of what allowed my sabbatical to become a true season of rest.

Sometimes we need to let go. Other times, we need to hold on.

And that brings us to Ecclesiastes 3:5: "a time to scatter stones, and a time to gather stones together."

Let us pray.

Prayer of Illumination

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[1] Matthew 11:28

Throughout Scripture, stones serve many purposes. They are used to remember, to build, to destroy, and to punish.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that life is full of seasons that seem to contradict one another. There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. And there is a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them.

This is what we call a dialectic tension: two seemingly opposite things that can both be appropriate, depending on the circumstances.

There is a time to hold on and a time to let go. A time to remember and a time to move forward. The challenge is knowing which time it is.

Let's begin with gathering stones.

In the book of Joshua, the Israelites have finally crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. After years of wandering in the wilderness, they are beginning a new chapter.

God tells Joshua to select twelve men, one from each tribe, and gather twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan River. These stones will serve as a memorial. When future generations ask, “What do those stones mean to you?” the Israelites will tell them how God brought them through the Jordan and led them into a new future.[2]

The stones remind the people of God's faithfulness.

We need those reminders, too. We need to remember the people who helped us, the prayers that sustained us, and the times when we weren't sure how we would make it through, but somehow we did.

Remembering God's faithfulness can give us hope for the future. But remembering the past is not the same as living in it. The Israelites were not supposed to stand on the riverbank forever, talking about the good old days. They were meant to carry that memory with them as they moved forward.

Churches can fall into that trap, too. We can spend so much time celebrating what God has done that we miss what God is doing now.

We need to remember, but we also need to keep moving.

Now let's consider the other side of the tension.

In the ancient world, scattering stones across a field was a military tactic that could destroy its ability to produce crops. In 2 Kings, we read about the Israelites ruining the fields of Moab by filling them with stones.[3]

On the contrary, a farmer gathers stones out of a field to prepare the land for something to grow. The same action can either destroy the possibility of new life or help make it possible. Which makes me wonder what the Spirit be prompting us this morning to clear away in our own lives?

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[2] Joshua 4:1b-9

[3] 2 Kings 3:25

Some of us carry old resentments, disappointments, regrets, wounds. Others hold on to the need to be right, the desire to control every outcome, or the belief that we must fix everything ourselves.

Sometimes we have carried these things so long that we have learned to work around them. We avoid difficult conversations. We let resentment shape our relationships. We allow fear to keep us from trying something new.

But what if, my friends, God is inviting us to face these things rather than work around them?

That doesn't mean we can simply decide to stop grieving or make every painful experience disappear. Some burdens take time, prayer, and help. But we can ask God for healing, take a step toward forgiveness, and acknowledge what is hurting us.

Sometimes we need to let go of what is preventing new life from taking root.

But Scripture gives us another, more troubling picture of gathering and scattering stones.

In the Old Testament, stoning was prescribed as capital punishment for certain violations of the law.[4] There is a story in Joshua of Achan, a man who disobeyed God's command not to take for himself some of the plunder from Jericho. He was caught and he and his family were brutally stoned to death, and a great heap of stones was raised over them.[5] It is a troubling story where stones were used as instruments of judgment and death.

Which brings us to a similar situation in the New Testament with Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery before Jesus. Their stones were ready, and they wanted him to decide what should happen to her.

They pointed to the law of Moses and asked whether she should be stoned.

Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground, ignoring their trap. When they continued questioning him, he said:

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

One by one, they dropped their stones and walked away.

Eventually, Jesus was alone with the woman. He asked her, "Has no one condemned you?"

She answered, "No one, sir."

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[4] Leviticus 20; 24-14-16; Deuteronomy 13:6-10; 17:2-7; 21:18-21; 22:20-24; Exodus 19:12-13; Numbers 15:32-36; Joshua 7:24-26

[5] Joshua 7:24-26

And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”[6]

Notice what Jesus did. He stopped the expected movement toward condemnation and death. He challenged the crowd to examine their own hearts, and he offered the woman something the crowd was not prepared to give: grace and the possibility of a new beginning.

The crowd saw a sinner who deserved punishment. But Jesus saw a person who needed the opportunity for a different future.

And isn't that an important lesson for us?

We live in a culture where stoning others is perfectly acceptable. Maybe not with rocks but with words. Spend any time on social media and we’ll see this for ourselves. Have you ever disagreed with someone and posted about it on Facebook or Instagram? A disagreement that could have been handled privately becomes a public attack.

We saw this happen this past week when a famous pop star had a disagreement with a shop owner in Brooklyn. Instead of working it out privately with the shop owner, they posted about it on social media. And when someone with a large following criticizes a person or a business, the consequences can be significant. It can be like throwing stones in a field.

We may not have a celebrity's audience, but we can do the same thing on a smaller scale. A cutting comment, a passive-aggressive post, or public criticism can cause real harm.

Sometimes we convince ourselves that we are simply standing up for what is right. And there are times when wrongdoing must be confronted. Grace does not require us to ignore injustice or excuse harmful behavior.

But Jesus asks us, his followers, to examine our own hearts first before we condemn someone else.

The important questions are we seeking justice, or are we seeking revenge? Are we trying to help someone change, or are we trying to make sure they pay? Are we leaving room for repentance and restoration, or have we decided that a person's worst mistake defines the rest of their life?

Jesus challenges us to put down our stones. He reminds us that we, too, stand in need of God's mercy. And if we have received that kind of grace, we are called to extend it to others. So maybe the next time we get our feathers ruffled, we write a hand written note and then throw it away. Or we work it out privately with the person who offended us.

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[6] John 8:1-8

And in this political season. The same could be said. I'm so tired of political adds on both sides. Let's start debating real issues in good faith to make a better America. Let's put our stones down.

Ya'll know that when ever I preach, I am preaching to myself too. Right? I'm just as guilty of having thrown my own stones in life and regretting it. Jesus wants something more from us which where we head to next.

In Peter's first letter, Jesus is described as a living stone, rejected by humans but chosen and precious in God's sight. And then Peter then describes US… followers of Jesus… as living stones being built into a spiritual house.[7] You see, God wants to build something new with us that is contrary to what the world builds.

Each of us brings a different story, a different set of gifts, and a different history. God brings us together, not because we are all alike, but because we belong to Christ.

Jesus is the cornerstone, the foundation upon which the whole structure rests. You take out Jesus and the whole house falls apart. Instead, we are being built together into something larger than ourselves.

This is a beautiful image of the church. Our calling is not to judge one another into submission, but to help one another grow in faith, love, and service… regardless of where we fall on the political spectrum.

In Revelation, John describes the New Jerusalem, where the foundations of the city's walls are adorned with precious stones. The biblical story ends not with a person crushed beneath a heap of stones, but with a vision of beauty, community, and God's presence among us.[8]

That is the future God invites us to build. You, me, we are the precious stones. And we are signs and sign posts of Jesus' new kingdom that has to come.

So where does all of this leave us?

I return to that day at the Washougal River. I needed to acknowledge what was weighing me down and trust God enough to let some of it go. But there were also things worth holding on to: memories of God's faithfulness, relationships that continue to sustain me, and the work God is calling me to do.

I want to leave us with three questions:

First, what do we need to release so that God can grow something new in our lives?

Second, what reminders of God's faithfulness do we need to carry with us?

And third, is there an apology we need to make, a relationship we need to mend, or a judgment we need to let go of?

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[7] 1 Peter 2:4-6

[8] Revelation 21:18-21

Let’s take some time this week to reflect on these questions. Let’s write down what comes to mind, talk with someone we trust, and identify one concrete step we can take.

Then remember the woman standing before Jesus, surrounded by people ready to condemn her.

Jesus could have joined the crowd. Instead, he interrupted it.

He did not deny her sin, but he refused to let her sin be the end of her story. He offered her grace and called her toward a new life.

That is the good news of the gospel. We all fall short. We all need forgiveness. And we all depend on a mercy we cannot earn for ourselves.

So may we be a people who know when to put down our stones. May we offer others the same mercy we have received. And may we trust that God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit can make new life possible…in us and even in the worst of our enemies.

Amen.