

Building an Altar out of the Rocks of Life
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1 Corinthians 3:9 –13, 16–17

For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple

Joshua 4:1-8

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.'" Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there.

It has been a difficult week in our country.

As we try to understand what race means

As we try to understand our role in some of the issues that we are struggling with --
- or at least that **I am** struggling with

Charlottesville has really eaten at me

And so too has been the heated rhetoric that has taken place since

I want to understand my role in what took place

And I have no easy answers --- if anything I have a heck of a lot more questions!

But God doesn't seem to be willing to let me off the hook . . .

I invite you to join me at 3pm this afternoon at 2nd Presbyterian for a service of prayer and reflection

I have a pile of rocks up here with me this morning.

I collected this the last time I went Trick or Treating . . .

No, seriously --- I have collected these rocks over my lifetime

Sometimes I picked them up purposefully --- as if I wanted to collect them

Other times, they were piled on me --- sometimes even thrown at me.

The truth is --- you too are carrying around a lot of rocks.

Some of the rocks that we carry are weighing us down.

Some of the rocks are a burden to us.

And there is no doubt but that some of the rocks that we are carrying are holding us back or at least slowing us down.

We all carry rocks - burdens of pain in our lives.

1. Bad relationship with parents
2. Lying to friends
3. Escape with drugs or alcohol
4. Loss of friends
5. Divorce
6. Breaking the law
7. Cheating on a spouse
8. Illness
9. Changes at Church
 - Staff changes
 - Pastoral Changes
 - Worship service time changes
10. Death of spouse - parent - child - friend

I don't know what your rocks are --- but what I do know, is that you have some

The bible is filled with stories about people who struggled with their faith

Abraham

Moses

Isaac

Joseph

David

Jesus

Disciples

(The list could go on and on . . .)

We all carry rocks --- every time we are hurt or disappointed by life we tend to pick up another rock,

the question is not whether we have rocks ---

No, the real question is what we do with those rocks?

Do we cart them around?

Do they wear them around our necks and allow them to weigh us down like a millstone?

Do we allow them to crush us?

If I had to pick a favorite character in the Bible . . .
I think the answer for me would be fairly simple

When I was asked to pick a "life verse" --- the verse you want to model your life after, I picked a verse from this person's life

"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

When I need encouragement --- I often find myself turning to this person's story

I am, of course, talking about Joshua

Joshua had plenty of rocks in his life.

And at one point --- God very directly told Joshua what to do with those rocks

Joshua is told to take the rocks --- the rocks of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness
the rocks of the death of their leader --- Moses

The rocks of disillusionment and hurt

God says --- take those rocks and build an altar to God.

But, my God, how do you do that?

There was a young preacher who went to preach at one of those mission stations you find in the inner city.

They are very strange places,

if you every get the opportunity, you should go and attend one,

but what makes them so strange is that it is one of the only places where people will actually get up and disagree with you while you are preaching.

Well, this young preacher was preaching, and he was quoting from Rudyard Kipling's poem, IF, it is a poem that you might be familiar with.

The poem begins by saying:

"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you; . . .

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew to serve your turn long after they are gone,"

then it concludes with these words

"Yours is the earth and everything that's in it, And --- which is more --- you'll be a man, my son!"

When the preacher had finished the poem, one of the men at the back, one of the few who were still awake, jumped up and screamed out with all his vigor:

"Yah, but what if you can't".

Now that is the issue that I think we all face.

When we come up against the rocks of life, it is not easy to keep our nerve and sinew, it is not easy to persevere.

But we do it, not of our own strength, but in the paradox of that mystery that God is with us, and that the loving almighty God is the God who has the power to overcome evil, who has the power to take the rocks out of the hard places of life and to turn them into an altar, and allow the honey to come forth.

This fall will mark the 32nd anniversary of my Brother Stewart's death.

It was in April of 1985, that the cancer was found in Stewart's body.

The day they discovered the cancer in Stewart's body I was throwing a graduation party in Durham, North Carolina.

In the midst of that party I received the worse phone call in my life up to now.

Eight short months later --- On November 11, 1985 Stewart Wesley Conger died.

I have felt the anguish of the rocks of life.

We have all felt the anguish of the rocks of life!

Every time a Pastor leaves a church they are struck with the sense of loss

We are told that we are not to have a relationship with the people that we gave our lives to --- Can you imagine after 17 years of watching people grow older, children grow up, deaths, marriages and births --- suddenly it is over?

You can --- a little bit, because you felt that when Anne left

No matter how you cut it --- it is a huge rock in one's life.

We all have been thrown against the rocks of life --- but the strange thing is ---
that in the midst of our pain ----
in the midst of our anguish --
in the midst of our darkness there is light.

In the midst of our sorrow there can be joy --- in the midst of our agony there can be sweetness --
-- Do you remember the Psalm last week?

Psalm 81 God promises to us: "with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

So, in the midst of our sorrow there can be joy --- in the midst of our agony there can be sweetness ---- IF WE ALLOW GOD TO BRING FORTH HONEY FROM THOSE ROCKS.

I prayed with all of my heart that God would deliver me from this evil by healing Stewart,
but God delivered me in a different way --- in a way that I did not expect.

Out of the rock that was Stewart's sickness and death --- God transformed me in a very real way.

I believe that Stewart has placed his mantle upon me.

When I think of him, his spirit is with me and I feel his joy, his enthusiasm, his love for people.

That mantle will be upon my shoulder and I will enjoy it for the rest of my life and because of that I gained a new sense of love for people,
 compassion for people,
 understanding for people,
 a new sense of patience and courage and trust.

I have seen the worst that life can throw at me; I have seen a young man who had the bravery and the courage to face it with faith and determination --- who kept the faith to the end.

Out of that Rock, by giving it to God, God brought forth honey.

Remember one thing; it is God who brings forth the honey from our rocks --- not us!

We can only give up our rocks and make an altar out of them --- but only God can bring forth the sweetness.

God is willing to give you that gift, if only you will give first your pain to God.

But that is not easy to do
 We like our pain
 smooth, comfortable

We can go through life trying to carry all of the world's burdens, or we can take those rocks --- those hard and difficult places of life and build an altar to God --- and we can trust that when we build that altar that God can, and will, bring forth honey out of our pain!

As we get ready to conclude this morning, during our closing hymn: "This Is A Day of New Beginnings" we are going to --- on the last verse --- process out of the Sanctuary and into the Welcome Center.

As you walk out, I invite you to come and pick up a rock --- and as you choose your rock --- may it symbolize to you some of the pain in your life --- and I invite you to bring that rock with you into the Welcome Center.

And as you come into the welcome center --- Like Joshua told the people of Israel --- I invite you to take that rock --- and give it to God
 To join with me in building God an altar out of our hurts and pains

 On the grand staircase, there is a table --- give God your pain and see if he won't bring forth Honey from those rocks.