

## **“LIVING STONES ... LIVING FAITH”**

By Fr. Close (text: 1 Peter 2:1-10)  
Sunday, April 28, 2002 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

The Biblical text we have today invites us to think about the call to God's service. It contains baptismal illusions that remind us that each of us, by virtue of our baptism, has already been called. The passage also gives us a glimpse of what the faith community looks like. First, we have an understanding of the “temple” ... the place where God's presence is manifest. Second, it is a place made up of “living stones” ... the people. We all are called to be a holy people. By that, we do not mean that we are called to be “holier than thou” or self-righteous. The text speaks about our being called out of the darkness (marked by sin, death, evil and despair) and called into the light (marked by faith, life, goodness and hope).

The stone sayings in the passage connect us with the person of Jesus. We learn that Jesus is the “cornerstone” ... the key to our community. Upon this cornerstone we build a Church. It begins not with brick and mortar, but with people. The Church never was intended to be a building, furniture, walls, windows and doors. It is and has always been first and foremost a group of people. The question for us today is, “How are we doing as living stones?”

I would like to share a little bit about my experience of stones throughout my life. I have found that stones can be both destructive and constructive. In either case, it is what we do with stones that make the difference. Let's consider the destructive nature. From the earliest of records of time, we learn that stones were among the first weapons. They have brought about harm and death. Stones also are obstacles that cause us to stumble. One of my earliest recollections of stones is a time when I was about 8 or 9 years old. A female classmate of mine was tormenting me. As she left my yard and made her way home, I picked up a stone to teach her a lesson. She was quite far away, but I hurled the stone with all my might. I learned a lesson day. Stones thrown in anger do not always strike the intended target! I miss the girl but managed to hit the windshield of the car she was near. I learned that anger and stones and throwing have painful consequences, both to my backside and wallet.

I remember another time when I was a young teen. We had moved to a new neighborhood. I was running through a new construction site with friend from my old home. We found a hill and a large stone wedged half way down. It presented a challenge to us. My friend jumped from the top of the hill and failed to dislodge the stone. He beckoned me to try. I learned a couple of lessons that day. First, your friends don't always have the best plan for you. Second, stones do move easily. Third, broken bones are very painful. Later in life, I learned how adults experience stones. Maybe you had painful kidney stones. Maybe you experience the agony that I suffered of gallstones. I ended up with an operation over those stones!

Think about the other ways stones are destructive. Do you remember your Greek mythology? Medusa could turn a person to stone with just a look. A few of us know what that is like! How many of you remember our college years and getting “stoned”? I can tell by the smiles on some of your faces that you know about that experience! We also have the stories about people being stoned to death in the Bible. It was a form of punishment. Stephen paid with his life for his belief by being stoned by the crowd.

What about the constructive nature of stones? Stones are used to build homes and shelters. They have provided protection in the form of forts. We have stone gardens and fences. We collect stones for their beauty. One of my most common experiences of stones is collecting them with my daughter Jennifer. I have not been able to travel with her without bringing home a trunk full of treasures. We have stones from the rock coast of Maine, granite from Cadillac mountain, treasures from North Carolina and elsewhere. My concern, and hope, is that when she gets a place of her own, the stone collection will go with her! One of our parishioners, Irene Setaro, recently moved. She invited me over and presented me with a box of stones collected from around the world! A fine addition to Jennifer’s growing collection!

As a kid, I grew up near lakes and streams. One of our favorite things to do was stone skipping. You tried to find a smooth, flat stone about the size of a silver dollar. You would throw the stone on top of the water and try to get as many skips as you could! If you couldn’t get at least three skips, you were a real novice. I remember all the camping and hiking trips I did growing up. When we set up camp in the afternoon, we would gather stones in a circle for the campfire. It protected us and contained the fire. Along the trails, we would find piles of stones that were markers for the hikers. Stones played a constructive role in my life!

I remember one other type of stone. I spend many summers on a north central Pennsylvania farm as a kid. I have picked more stones from fields than I care to admit! One particular stone often caught my attention. There were fossils. In the stones you could see the remains of past life. I considered these stones dead, lifeless memories of the past.

But what are we to make of this notion of living stones? I remember a college professor telling me that all of creation contains life. This was before we encountered meteors and stones on other planets with microscopic particles of life on it. He said everything has life and moves, even stones! I can remember our confusion when he said stones have life. Before we could ask he continued, “Yes, even stones move ... but they do so v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y!” Sometimes I think when it comes to our faith, we move very slowly. How can we understand stones are living or life giving?

I recall an experience of a stone that transformed my life. I was a young man who attended a Cursillo weekend in Virginia. During the weekend, along with 70 other men, we received little gifts and cards. One woman gave each of us a small black stone with the word “First” written on it. Her note said, “This stone is a gift. It is meant to remind you who is called to be first in your life ... Jesus.” The stone became a reminder of

Jesus' presence in my life. I carried it in my pocket with my keys. Each time I reached in, for them ... I would find the stone. It went with me everywhere until one day I wore a pair of pants with a hoe in the pocket! I found my keys, but couldn't find the stone. It didn't matter by that time. I now knew the message of the stone by heart.

Living stones talk to us about a living faith. The Christian community is built first with living stones. We need God and people to build a Church. We build the faith community a stone at a time. They come in all kinds of shapes, colors, textures and types. In the community of faith, they become polished. They shine and bring beauty to all that see them. We are called to be living stones. The Biblical text today tells us that it matters how we live. A living stone is not formed by occasionally attending a service. It is a matter of making our faith a daily practice.

Do you know what is the motto of Pennsylvania? We call ourselves the "Garden State" in New Jersey. What is our neighbor? They are the "Keystone State." Do you know what is a keystone? If you look at windows and doors in buildings with a stone arch you will see it. The keystone is the center stone. It is larger than the rest and central to the arch. It takes the forces of nature that would tumble the arch and holds the stones up together. The keystone holds the arch and other stones in place. Jesus is our cornerstone and keystone. He is the one that holds us up in the midst of the challenges and stress of the world. We can only be supported by the influence that he exerts. Together, the keystone and the others, the cornerstone and the rest create something.

I am about to leave for my sabbatical. It my first such experience in the 17 years of my priesthood. I thank you for the opportunity for this time of reflection, rest, study and travel. I thought large about what I could say and leave with you. I decided upon these polished stones that each of you has received. There are gifts. They are a reminder. They are meant to remind us that we are living stones. They also are meant to remind us that Jesus is at the center of our lives. We are called to be living stones. We are not called to be fossils, dead reminders of the past. We are not called to be destructive, causing pain and death. We are called to be living stones. We are to create life by the way we live.

Put these stones in your pocket or purse. Carry them with you. Use a place that you go to frequently. Let these stones be a visible sign of your call to live a life of faith. We all participate in the membership of the living stones by virtue of your baptisms. When I return in the fall, share with me the stores that you discover about your faith life. Tell me what you have discovered about your call. Let me know what you are doing or are going to do to build God's Church. Oh, one final note ... please don't throw the stones! May God bless you ... all of you ... livings stones! Amen.