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Tim Hughes Williams

Sermon: A Living Stone

The First New Testament Lesson: 1 Peter 2:2-10

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

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like 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. ⁶For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The Second New Testament Lesson: Acts 7:54-60

⁵⁴When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵But 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 Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then 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. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then 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.

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When Flannery O'Connor published her second novel, "The Violent Bear It Away," she added an epitaph on the front page – a single Bible verse from the Gospel of Matthew: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent bear it away" (11:12).

O'Connor spent a lot of time thinking about this particular verse, and it became central to a theological concept that she elaborated on in her personal letters. She called it "the violence of love."¹ If that phrase, the violence of love, makes you uncomfortable, well that was kind of her M.O.

It was, in a way, a justification for her entire catalogue of short stories, which are famous for their grotesque violence. A grandmother is horrified when a man known as The Misfit leads her family off into the woods never to return. Or a bull gores a woman in the middle of her own farmland. A traveling bible salesman robs a one-legged woman, leaving her trapped in the loft of a barn. These are scandalous, lurid plotlines of stories that seem better suited for HBO than the mind of a quiet Catholic lady from small-town Georgia.

Maybe that's one reason why I loved O'Connor so much as a high school student. If she really did get on her knees in the morning and say her prayers and then write these crazy messed-up stories then perhaps there was hope for me and my depraved thoughts as well.

O'Connor described each of these stories, in their own way, as tales of redemption, leaving her readers – particularly her religious readers – very uncomfortable. How could these stories, which seem to revel in violence, be stories about God's love?

Lurking underneath *that* question is another, even more unsettling one. Why are religion and violence always in each other's business? They seem to fit together like two peas in a pod, leaving not a few people to

¹ Most of my knowledge of O'Connor's interest in Matthew 11:12 is drawn from Susan Srigley's essay, "The Violence of Love," *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 39, Autumn, 2007.

conclude that religion actually *fuels* violence in ways that are a deal-breaker.

That line of thinking, by the way, also leads you straight to Jesus' death on the cross. If Jesus' violent death is really at the heart of Christian faith, if that very violence is somehow the key that unlocks the door to the love of God, then we are left with the uncomfortable conclusion that rather than casting out violence, perfect love is actually founded upon it.

It's precisely that kind of conclusion that has led many to abandon our tradition, or else to take significant interpretive steps in another direction.

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent bear it away."

Like Flannery O'Connor we can't help but wonder what it that means.

Today's scripture passages make for a very interesting Eastertide pairing. Eastertide is the liturgical season of fifty days following Easter Sunday. It is a season of light and new life and hope. And in the middle of that we are served up a short and horrific execution from the Book of Acts.

It's unexpected, this shocking little story, presented with next to no context in the lectionary. What happened to lead up to this moment?

Stephen and the other disciples have been traveling in and around Jerusalem, following Jesus' final directive that they tell people about him everywhere they go (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit propelled them through Jerusalem and the outlying areas and they were healing people and performing other miracles along the way. So maybe its not surprising, given what had happened to Jesus, that this activity provoked the anger of religious authorities. Soon enough, Stephen was arrested and brought before the Council. Specifically, they accused him of "speaking blasphemous words against Moses" and threatening to "change the customs that Moses handed on to us" (6:11,14). He's given an

opportunity to speak by the high priest who is presumably Caiaphas, the same man who interrogated Jesus. Stephen must have known that his death was a very real possibility.

And yet his passionate speech should remind us that this is not a conflict between Christians and Jews, at least not yet. It's not an *interfaith* conversation, as all parties still identify as Jewish. Stephen starts at the beginning, invoking Abraham and Moses and Jacob and David. It's a profoundly Jewish account about the dynamic, evolving revelation of God, and what it takes to receive it.

Since his speech is basically a sermon itself, I'll try and summarize. Stephen makes the case that his faith in Jesus is actually deeply consistent with God's relationship to Israel. For as long as God's people have existed, he argues, there have been messengers and messages for them. While the messages have varied, they have always *asked* something of the people. Messages called for the courage to leave home, or to return home, or change your ways, or welcome your enemy, or start over again. God's messengers and messages come to us, argues Stephen, and the people of God are thus divided into two groups – those who accept the message as true, and those who don't.

"I'm not corrupting the faith," Stephen argued in so many words. "I'm *embodying* it. By refusing to accept my message, you take your place among the Pharaohs and Joseph's brothers and the wicked kings and false prophets." People who rejected the word of God.

The text says that they literally covered their ears so as to ignore what he was saying as they grabbed his body and dragged him out of the city to die. The macabre appeal of stoning someone is that everyone gets to be the executioner and yet no one is singularly responsible for the death. It's the definition of a scape-goating. Scape-goating is when a group of people identify a victim and rally around them in violence, so as to distract themselves from other uncomfortable truths.

Stephen's blood is shed that day as a scapegoat, a distraction from a message that no one wanted to receive.

That's the account we get in today's reading. But at the same time, I can't help but hear a tinge of self-satisfaction in the writing of Acts. Stephen is considered to be the church's first martyr, and you can hear the veneration in the rhetoric. Stephen is introduced as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5). Even his enemies were forced to concede that "his face was like the face of an angel" (6:15). When he died he echoed several of Jesus' final words: "Lord, receive my spirit," and "Lord, do not hold these sins against them" (7:60).

Please don't hear me saying that these things aren't true of Stephen. Who am I to say that? I'll only say that all the glowing descriptors begin to obscure Stephen's humanity, which is often the first step in another form of scape-goating. Because how can we discuss scape-goating without acknowledging the anti-Semitic scape-goating of Jewish people using texts just like this one? Or the scape-goating of Protestants during the Inquisition? Or women during the Salem witch trials? Or LGBT people in Chechnya right now? It's as though religion provides a shortcut to the kind of certainty one needs to be in the deep denial one needs to commit acts of violence. The religion doesn't cause the violence, exactly, but it does seem to grease the wheels. "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent bear it away" (11:12). It's very disturbing.

Our *other* Scripture for today, the one that Kathy read a moment ago, comes from 1 Peter. It's a letter written, if not exactly by the apostle Peter, than by a school of people who wished to speak with Peter's point of view. The letter is addressed specifically to the churches of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. The intent of the letter is to encourage them, because they were undergoing persecution – religious violence – for their faith. If you listen closely here you hear some weird parallels to our text from Acts.

"⁴Come to him, a living stone," the letter says. "Though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" (4:2-5). Here Jesus is positioned as a living cornerstone, architecturally essential and yet constantly rejected.

It's very curious to me that both texts today revolve around stones, those rocks hurled at Stephen and the precious cornerstone described here. It's more than a coincidence, I think, and it's a really compelling way to think about the problem of religion and violence.

What is a living stone, anyway? It is both immovable and dynamic, sturdy and flexible. It's an anchor that never stays put. It is also, to state the obvious, a metaphor, and one that can be a little tricky to get your head around. Luckily for us, there is a very handy way to describe it – in Stephen's sermon in Acts 7.

⁴⁴ “Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness,” said Stephen. And he's referring to the tabernacle. For generations, the most sacred space in Judaism was the box that held the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. Those stone tablets were kept in a tent called the Holy Tabernacle. Like any tent, the tabernacle was designed to be portable. It was the home of a God on the move. It was, in its own way, a living stone.

“But it was Solomon,” said Stephen, “who built a house for [God]. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.” The house Stephen refers to, of course, is the Temple. Solomon was so proud of the Temple, built of the finest cedar and giant pieces of marble and granite. It became the centerpiece of the faith. But it was also very immovable, and it was as much a tribute to the wealth and power of Solomon as it was a symbol of the glory of God.

It's this attack on the temple itself that drives the crowd to madness, causing them to hurl stones through the air.

See once a wall is built by human hands and declared holy, it can be defended. Must be defended. It becomes the place that separates us from them.

“Come to him, a living stone,” writes the Apostle to a people in pain and fear. “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”

What strikes me about the living stone, like the Tabernacle, is its humility. It is not a palace, by any stretch of the imagination. It's a glorified tent. It moves. It may not be there in the morning. It requires humility. It requires pursuit. But at the end of the day, it is a sanctuary. It is the place where we encounter the Holy.

The living stone defies and confounds pridefulness, accumulation of assets, certainty, and stubbornness. It rewards flexibility, servanthood, and a faith. In short, while it may be true that religion has the capacity to throw stones, the subversive heart of the Gospel – the living stone - is the place where violence ceases.

In her essay, "The Violence of Love," Susan Srigley does her best to unpack Flannery O'Connor's complex relationship to violence. She kills a character in brutal fashion in almost every single one of her stories. Her critics were quick to label this violence as gratuitous and gross, particularly for a so-called Catholic author. But Srigley suggests that violence is not an end unto itself. It provokes the reader into asking deeper questions about what is happening and why. Characters frequently experience moments of clarity or grace in her stories, shortly after experiences of violence. That sequence has led many readers to assume that the violence is causing the spiritual awakening. But Srigley suggests that O'Connor is doing something much more subtle than that. Because her whole world is anchored in the reality of God's Kingdom of Love, she is "reading" the violence through the lens of Jesus. Reading the violence through the lens of the Gospel, says Srigley, exposes it as fruitless and self-serving. It is not the violence itself but its hollow core that awakens people to the hunger that they feel for grace.

Reading violence through the lens of the Gospel reveals scape-goating for the lie that it is. All of a sudden, maybe for the first time, the victim becomes visible.

This is O'Connor's strange understanding of Matthew 11:12. "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent bear it away" (11:12). That strange phrase, "bear it away," in O'Connor's imagination, suggests a willingness of God

to move so close to the violence of our world, to look at it unflinchingly and declare it powerless. That is, for her, the ultimate message, the thing being asked of each of us by the Gospel.

This is, of course, not the typical understanding of Jesus' death on the cross, in which Jesus sacrifices his life to save us from our sins. But it is a very compelling alternate reading, in which Jesus endures death to reveal the scape-goating mechanism itself, to stand in solidarity with the victim, to open a doorway to new realizations of grace. Rene Girard puts it like this: "To say that Jesus dies not as a sacrifice, but so that there may be no more sacrifices, is to recognize in him the Word of God."²

This is what happened, at any rate, to the young man who was holding the coats of the many executioners, the day that Stephen died. His name was Saul, and the text goes out of its way to note that he was there. He was there because he approved of the execution. He was there because he believed that the cause was righteous.

It would not be long, though, before he would experience his own moment of awakening on the Damascus road.

"Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He put down stones forever. He set about building a very different kind of community.

I think O'Connor understood very intuitively how easy religion can be co-opted for corrupt purposes. How the faithful can be manipulated into postures of violent certainty. Indeed, we are uniquely vulnerable to that particularly sinfulness in this, the triumphant season of Eastertide in the half-life of American democracy.

So let us not look away. Let us not avert our eyes from the violence that is being carried out right now in the name of false gods. It is nothing new and it will not prevail.

² Srigley, 34.

We worship a God who has whispered to us from the mouths of so many messengers over the centuries. A God who is as faithful as she is unpredictable. A God who calls us out of certainty into faith. A God who says, "Once you were no people, but now you are my people." "Once you were defined by the violence of your hands, but now you will be defined by your love."