

Living Stones
1 Peter 2:5
April 27, 2014
Rev. Adrienne Carr

"You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 2:5

This past Friday as I was writing this sermon, I was looking out from my room at Lake Morey. The Resort on the lake was where the Vermont Conference UCC Annual Meeting took place. The resort is a far cry from the dorm rooms and cafeterias of the colleges where we usually meet. Those of us among the 50, 60, 70, 80+ year old attendees appreciated real beds, private baths and tablecloths in the Dining Room. I don't believe the young and entry level middle aged folks had any complaints either. Ann Vivian and Gail Compton were among the planners. Good job. Anyone interested in being a delegate next year, talk to them.

The reason that I mention my delightful experience is that there was a deeply meaningful theme around which the conference program was organized: "Rooted and Grounded in Love." I had already decided to focus on another theme for the sermon, "You shall be living stones." Those words were, in fact, the theme of my candidating sermon. I also believe I said something like, "What's a nice Catholic girl like me doing in a church like this."

Could these two themes of roots and stones complement each other? It was worth a try and here is the result.

When I came to First Congregational church, almost 18 years ago, for my first visit, I was captivated by the sight of the bricks that have held the sanctuary together for 172 years. I saw then and still today, see a stunning symbol in those interconnected bricks. Anyone, probably everyone who has some experience with building towers with alphabet blocks, knows what a great guffaw comes out a child as the tower begins to totter and then falls to the ground. If the tower doesn't fall quickly enough, a little hand gives a push and down it goes. I am not sure what message we teach children with those falling blocks. Maybe it is that things fall apart either accidentally or on purpose and sometimes it is fun.

The secret to a permanent structure made of bricks is interconnectedness within a bed of concrete. Like the outside of our church, we have been a congregation in interconnected covenant with one another since 1805, before and after our Sanctuary was built of bricks. During that time, we have weathered historical storms such as the sending of our daughters and sons and spouses to every war since 1812; or the Influenza epidemic of 1918-19 where our church became a safe place for the children whose parents became ill; or during the Great Depression where pledging went down but doors remained open. We bonded closely together as we watched the two towers fall and organized with the Unitarian Church a community worship service on the evening of 9/11. We sent with our blessing a group to India following the Tsunami who brought with them the outpouring of generous and spontaneous financial support that allowed the James Hospital both to save lives and also, to keep thousands fed until order was restored. A few of our members responded to the earthquake in Haiti by going into the fractured city of Port Au Prince to provide medical care and support. And we cried together at the death of Bob Lee.

We have weathered spiritual storms through those years. In 1805, the gathered congregation had strong Puritan influence. Going to worldly entertainments, participating in card games, missing Sunday Worship were among the actions that were censured. It took years but as times changed and outlooks broadened, the theology became less severe and more accepting of people's human foibles. Under recent pastors, going back to Charles Jones who began one of the first AA meetings in Vermont; and George Lawrence, who with Nancy, brought groups of high school students to the British Isles to touch their heritage; and to Martin Copenhaver who led YETS trips and knew the name of everyone he ever met; and Bob Lee who opened the doors to India for us; and now Peter Cook who has led trips to Africa and is working toward a renewal of our relationship with James Hospital in India.

Through these leaders there has been a gradual opening of doors and hearts so that today, all are, indeed, welcome into full membership and all are encouraged to bring God's love and justice into the local and world community through JUMP, Small Potatoes, Meals on Wheels, YETS, YES, Ronald McDonald House, and Adult Service Trips to India and Haiti.

Virtually each new and Spirit led decision has come at a cost. The introduction of inclusive language was joyful for some and painful for others in our congregation as was the decision to welcome same sex couples into the full life of the church. Sadly, some folks withdrew for a time or permanently; yet time and distance have shown that we are stronger and wiser for those decisions. And those bricks keep standing as this congregation weathers and weathers again.

Our Church Covenant is the cement that keeps the bricks firm. Each of us, when joining the Church says with the congregation the words of our Covenant. I would like to read those words to you and invite you to listen with both ears and hearts:

"We covenant with the Lord and with one another to respond to God's call to be God's people in the name of Jesus Christ. We take this to be our Church, promising to walk with our fellow members in faithfulness and Christian love. We accept as our responsibility the worship of God, the fellowship of the community, and the witness of our church. We claim as our mission the promotion of justice, human dignity and peace; and participation in meeting the unfolding needs of God's people. We bind ourselves to follow the leading of God's Spirit as God is pleased to reveal God's will to us."

At the Conference, some of us joined a group from another church for a meal. As is my custom at these Annual Meetings, when sitting with delegates I haven't met, I always ask what church they attend. I did so and when told the name of the church, I said, "Oh, that's Mary's church." I was quickly put in my place as one of the group looked at me rather sternly, saying, "It is God's church. Mary is the pastor and we are all the ministers." Her response to me was annoying, rude and absolutely correct. I merely wished to let the group know that Mary is a friend and because of that friendship, I knew their church, but that woman spoke a profound truth about what church means.

Church is both a solid building and also a living entity. In 1805, that small group of people who signed a covenant planted seeds deep within the collective soul of their community. Those seeds took root, embedded deeply in the soil of that covenantal foundation. Through all the 209 years of this church, the roots have remained strong and the perennial flowering has continued. You, my dear friends, are the flowers, grown from the roots planted all those years ago. You, my friends are the interconnected bricks. You

are the ministers of First Congregational Church and always have been. You are the roots that ensure new flowering. You are the bricks that keep this structure strong. A long and distinguished line of pastors has served with you in your ministry, occasionally checking the cement and regularly watering the soil but you are the covenant reality that gives light and love and strength to this church.

I know this because I have seen it to be true. Each Sunday you are here, individuals, couples, families. Some of you come from just up the street. Others come from greater distances such as the islands or Swanton or down in Charlotte. You come for the joy of being together in Worship, for the music, for the words and for the prayers. Some of you come out of emptiness. Some, out of fullness. Some of you come in physical or emotional pain. Some, bursting with joy. Through these moments, all of the 'yous' gradually become 'we's' as we share our joys and concerns, greet one another with handshakes or hugs and participate in the offering which is our act of faith in the present and the future of this sacred place of rootedness and living stones.

We do so much more. We express our covenant in caring for one another by offering rides, bringing meals, visiting folks and noticing when someone is not in his or her pew. We express our covenant by singing in the choir, ringing the bells, ushering, greeting and reading. Some of us bring food for Fellowship so that we can enjoy those weekly catch up moments with tasty treats. We take time out of busy weeks to serve on committees, to knit shawls for those who are sick, spend Saturday mornings in special hospitality serving breakfast through Small Potatoes. We work in the Poss Shop or JUMP or we assist Sarah and Chrissy in the office; some spending hours with finances and some in stuffing envelopes or folding bulletins. And, with every activity, we sink those roots deeper and solidify the interconnected bricks. We get out there into the community, delivering Meals on Wheels, making dinners for Dismas House and giving support to our New Americans in Burlington. Our youth give a week of service each summer through Youth Experience in Travel and Service trips and Youth Experience in Service at Sarah Holbrook Center. Some of those with unique talents tend our gardens, paint walls or create a larger than life Jesus puppet. I apologize for what I am missing, but you understand, I am sure, how 'we are the church together.'

You may have received a letter from me within the last couple of days. In that letter, I announced that I will be retiring in September. This decision has been both hard and easy. Easy because I will be 71 in August and have two and 8/9th grandchildren with whom Neil and I want to be present. Easy because with every arthritic tweek, I realize that more time in warm climates may be very nice.

Hard because I have been here for eighteen years, a generation. I have had opportunities to laugh and to cry with so many of you. You have had opportunities to laugh with or at me. You have invited me into your homes, shared your pain or fears or joy with me and together we have celebrated the Bi-Centennial and the successful conclusion of the Capital Campaign. I have officiated at some of your weddings and gone on one memorable honeymoon. I have baptized and confirmed your children and signed too many 3rd grade bibles to count. With you, I have said a final farewell to many dear friends whose lives enriched all of us so.

This is not a final good bye. I will be here through the summer, except when I am with my daughter and son-in-law at the birth of their child. We will have several months

yet, to play and dream and hope and share together. I have not forgotten the Advanced Directives. Watch for small group gatherings to work together on filling them out.

Peter and the church leadership have exciting new plans for the Fall that will be revealed soon. I have discovered that one of Peter's favorite words is 'Fun.' Expect some of that.

I have been honored and blessed to have spent these years with you. You have made me a better person and a wiser minister. You have overlooked or forgiven my mistakes and for that I am grateful.

I close with a prayer written by my friend, Rev. Martha Peck, for worship during the Annual Meeting:

Because, great God of love, there are deep roots under us,
We will celebrate the complexity hidden in the human heart,
And the diversity that is our strength.
Because, Lord Christ of the parables, there are deep roots under us,
We will water the seeds of faith deeply, and wait patiently for growth.
Because, Holy Spirit of community, there are deep roots under us.
We will anchor one another in times of doubt and fear,
And trust that all manner of things will be well.
And that nothing is truly wasted in your ecology of life. Amen.