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Stones of Life  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
May 10, 2020  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 7:51-60 and John 14:1-6a

Happy Mother's Day! (*pause*) I left a pause for you to respond - and I hope you did. Well, we've done it. We've said those 3 little words like we do every year. That's how we honour mothers, with 3 little words, right? Shall I wrap this up now and invite us to coffee time? Perhaps not. I'm sure you would all rather watch me flail away here and try to find some way to relate Mother's Day to the story where Stephen is stoned to death. No problem!

Now, I realize that there are at least 3 different ideas of what "Mother's Day" is all about. The oldest tradition of celebrating mothers that I could find is from Britain, where starting around the 16th century "Mothering Sunday" was declared to be the 4th Sunday in Lent. The tradition was that on Mothering Sunday, servants were all given the day off to go visit their mothers. This tradition died out by the 19th century, but during the 2nd world war American servicemen brought with them their own tradition of "Mother's Day" on the second Sunday in May. And the American holiday of Mother's Day had 2 separate meanings, depending on how you punctuated the word "mother's". [slide: mother's vs mothers']

So what we call Mother's Day is either a celebration of your own mother, or all mothers, or perhaps even all aspects of mothering. And if that spectrum is not wide enough for you, the official name of this day in the United Church calendar is actually "Christian Family Sunday". A celebration of our church family. And perhaps the idea of mothering can itself be broadened further into the recognition of family and "kin". Kin in the sense of whoever we relate to in our lives.

[slide: stones]

We'll get back to that idea. But first - let's deal with that interesting story about Stephen preaching to the crowds and getting stoned to death. What's with that story? My first observation is that I want to shake Stephen's hand and compliment him. All ministers dream of preaching a sermon that is so powerful that it moves the congregation

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to action. He succeeded there. But Stephen was playing with fire, because he was preaching the end of the world and end-of-the-world preaching has its own special challenges. Who can blame the congregation for throwing rocks when the preacher offers an image of a wonderful future and that future fails to materialize?

Stephen is preaching Jesus as the messiah who would liberate the people. But when Jesus is crucified, what happened to that plan? Jesus did not liberate the people in the way they were expecting. It is quite easy to imagine people wanting to throw stones at Stephen. Some messages are simply hard to hear. And some messages are simply hard to deliver and so we avoid them.

Our lectionary authors actually fall into that trap this week. The given lectionary reading from Acts started in verse 55 with this - "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God." If we had started reading there we would have heard a story about a faithful martyr who preached the truth to an unruly congregation. I decided we should start reading a few verses earlier so that we might understand why it was that Stephen was the focus for such hostility. And I think we got a pretty clear picture. Depending on which translation you look at, Stephen calls the crowd "stiff-necked", "bullheaded", "stubborn", "hardheaded". Stephen accuses the people of opposing the Holy Spirit. Of being betrayers and murderers. (Well at least Stephen was right about them being murderers). I certainly do not condone violence, but on balance, I think I have some appreciation that Stephen himself generated the hostility that led to his death. Stephen is telling the crowd that Jesus is the only path to God, and that as Jews, they have missed the boat. Of course they threw rocks!

And yet, the authors of our lectionary left that part out. They wanted us to hear and reflect only on Stephen's faithful preaching, to portray him as a victim and a martyr, not the creator of the anger that killed him. Stephen the martyr is a much nicer hero than Stephen the anti-semitic trouble-maker.

If Stephen was reflecting while being stoned, I wonder if he was perhaps reconsidering the introduction to his sermon. Or perhaps in a futuristic vision he realized that online worship would be a fantastic idea. But if nothing else, he learned about how dedicated people are to feeling that they are right, and moreover, that people are very

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committed to the idea that if I am right, then somebody else must be wrong.

Stephen and his crowd had not considered religious tolerance as an option. In Jesus's day, in Palestine, the Romans were very good at practicing religious tolerance, but the Jewish community was far more exclusive.

Today's gospel reading is also hard to understand in a framework of religious tolerance. When Jesus - or rather, when John's Jesus - says "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." - how are we to understand that? How are we to understand those words while at the same time respecting people of other faiths? How do I explain those words to my Hindu neighbour? At the same time, how do we hold our own faith while respecting others? Religious tolerance is far more acceptable now, but even we sometimes struggle with the details.

This question shows up in different ways, in different words. Some people speak of pluralism and religious tolerance. Some people speak of downplaying "religion" altogether and use more "spiritual" language. Some people speak of a "post-theistic" time, and try to move beyond speaking of "God" at all. Some people find this too much like work and just sign up for yoga.

But of course, this debate goes far beyond our own church. The debate is based on foundational understandings of Christianity, so the debate is global - and important. How exactly do we see our own faith and what do we really think of other faiths. R. Kirby Godsey, in his book *Is God a Christian* sees "all religions as broken vessels", and sees God as beyond what any person, or any religion, can contain. To quote Godsey, "Chances are, the idea of God is more than any of us can really imagine. More than anyone's religion can ever tell us." And -

[slide: prism and light]

"Looking through the prism through which others see the light of God, we too may see light anew."

Some Christians think that the answer to this is to retreat - to go back to the good old days. To find - or to create - a community that is "essentially Christian". And perhaps that works for some people. But for me, the challenge of pluralism is more of a "wake up call" to questions of faith that we should have been asking anyway. I will agree that in

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some ways many Canadians feel that pluralism was “forced” on us by changing reality and immigration, but the questions that surface because of pluralism are important questions for all Christians to ask - even if they do live in a Christian “bubble”. And I say that because how we see other faiths helps us understand our own faith.

[image: olive press]

If you’ve been sleeping up to now, you might want to wake up, because this is where I start to find hope in this story. Stones can be used to kill, or they can be put to constructive purposes. We get to choose what to do with them. For example, stones can be used for building things, like this olive press that has provided food for a small community for centuries. And of course, food is a great way to build community. That donkey-drawn stone is not just crushing olives, it is building community.

Here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church, our motto is “Building the kin-dom of God”.

[slide: building the kin-dom]

What building materials do we have at hand right now for the work of building that kin-dom. When we reflect on the story of the stoning of Stephen, we recognize that stones can be used for destructive or constructive purposes. And I believe we now have new building materials in the form of COVID-19 and our response to it.

COVID-19 has been destructive in many ways of course. But I believe that it can also be a force for building community - perhaps even for building the kin-dom of God right here.

And that seems like an appropriate message for Mother’s Day. Particularly if we consider the broader implications of Mother’s Day and see it as an opportunity to celebrate all of our kin, God’s kin, the kin-dom of God, the kin that this congregation was holding in it’s hearts and minds when you chose to adopt your motto, “Building the kin-dom of God”. We can celebrate family today. But I want to celebrate our church family too.

Sometimes, Mother’s Day can become a celebration of family in an idealized form, leading to sermons that would fit seamlessly into an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. But to me, the word “kin” is much broader than that. It’s about family in the sense I hope

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we understand it in this church. Family - beyond biological family - is that place where you are known. And you are not just known by name, you are known in that people know who you are, including your gifts and your limitations. Your hopes and dreams and failures. Your stories. A place where we are all encouraged to become the fullest expression of who we are. Does that describe who we are at SHUC? Or if not, does that describe who we hope to be? Not only for ourselves, but for “kin” we have not met yet in our community?

This call to embrace “kin” isn’t new of course. But right now COVID-19 is providing a useful vehicle for enhancing the family aspect of church. Are you lonely? Reach out to someone else and you will likely find that they are lonely too. I understand that we cannot meet in the ways that we want to, but today we have so many ways to connect! And of course, we don’t need to forget about telephones and cards in the mail.

This week, a friend of mine changed his tag line to “we are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm”. The statement “we are not all in the same boat” is a reflection of that fact that our individual responses to COVID-19 vary a lot. Some of us are employed and overworked. Some of us are unemployed and bored. Some people have been forced to isolate in long-term care homes with insufficient staff, and some people are isolating on their 300 foot yachts with an army of staff. Some people are making a lot of money from the pandemic, and others are losing their shirts.

But at the same time, we are all in the same storm. We all know a certain amount of fear, and anger caused by isolation. We all recoil at stories of death and disability from the virus. We all wonder, “when will this end”. And I suspect that most of us have stopped asking “when will we get back to normal” and have come to realize that we are already in a new normal. We are all in the same storm.

As one example, over my years doing pastoral care, I have often heard people say they feel like they have “lost a year” due to a death in the family, or a significant illness. But the same people often also reflected that they felt alone because nobody else understood their situation. And now, with COVID-19 most of us are familiar with the idea of losing a season - spring. Some of us are talking about writing off all of 2020 - of feeling we might lose a year. But we have the advantage that many people actually do

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understand our situation, because we are experiencing it. We are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm.

What a unique opportunity to reach out and do a bit of mothering, in our families, in our church family, and in our wider community. COVID-19 is an opportunity to keep building the kin-dom of God in our midst.

I'd like to close with a quote from Bill McKibben, who wrote this in the May, 2020 edition of Sojourners Magazine: "The day will come when we can easily return to church, to the store, to the hairdresser – for that we will be able to thank the scientists, and the brave doctors and nurses, who did what they had to do during this emergency. But their courage will have been wasted if nothing deeper changes in how we treat one another and the planet."

Let's use this opportunity we have been given as we continue to build the kin-dom of God. Happy Mother's Day!

*Amen.*