

Do you know what the highest mountain valley east of the Rockies is? It is Canaan Valley, West Virginia. The valley nestles in the bottom of a bowl, surrounded by barren, windblown tundra on the tops of the mountains. As you walk across the strangely spongy surface of the mosses and lichens that cling to the earth high up, suddenly there rears up a row of teeth in front of you, stone stalagmites pushing up from the earth. Chiseled and chipped by decades of wind erosion, these granite goliaths are more like sculptures than stones. Apparently climbing up them you can discover nooks and crannies and caves to hide in.

Stones speak. As Jesus prophesied, stones even “cry out.” Stones are hard and unyielding, yet they also are strong and enduring. They can hold up the walls of our civilizations, or they can crash through and crush the shelters we’ve created. We give precious stones, gemstones, as tokens of love and fidelity. We hurl stones in anger and hate as the ultimate signs of condemnation and punishment. Strong voices in our tradition have argued that even stones need to be seen, not just as “organic” entities, but as in some way as “living.” Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century and Jonathan Edwards in the 18th both contended that stones in some way share in the “consciousness” of all living things. Jesus himself talked of the way stones can so share in the suffering of the “Son of Man” that they will “cry out” if we fail to praise the Son of God.

But what concerns us this morning is that the metaphor of “stones” and “living stones” looms large in the imagination of how we live our lives. As we read in 1 Peter’s text today, “stone” images are everywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. Though Jesus is traditionally identified as a carpenter, his work most certainly involved building with far more stone than wood. Jesus used stone imagery so much and in powerful ways. He didn’t just speak about stumbling blocks and corner stones, he also found among his detractors people with heads of bone and hearts of stone. He knew stones could be both building blocks and road blocks.

Among all the “stone sayings” that have become part of our language, there is the adage to “leave no stone unturned.” To leave no stone unturned means to try everything, look everywhere, when on a quest for truth, for meaning, for success, for life itself. If a child becomes ill, a parent will “leave no stone unturned” in seeking a cure. A teacher will “leave no stone unturned” in order to interest students and make information come alive. A politician “leave no stone unturned” when looking for votes.

So why do churches often leave whole quarries full of stones unturned. We cannot be just a peace church, or a justice church, or a full-service church, or a house church. If churches turn over only one stone, the spiritual house they build will be little more than a tiny studio apartment. A studio or “efficiency” apartment is a nice way of saying you get one room to do everything in: eat, sleep, cook, relax, play, work.-all squeezed into one small space. Why should we make that kind of layout our blueprint for life?

In today’s Gospel text Jesus declares, “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” 1 Peter calls on the new faith community to be “living stones” even as Jesus is the living cornerstone. There is only ONE cornerstone. But it takes a lot of different stones to construct the big, rambling “spiritual house” or “mansion” Jesus described. As the community built on the hope of Christ, we need to turn over lots of stone, to “leave no stone unturned,” as we work to build up the new spiritual structure built on Christ.

1. First, let’s turn over “The Rolling Stone.” The rolling stone, the stone that gathers no moss, is always out there, always on the move. Every Christian community must be on the move and about mission. After all, God’s recreation of men and women into a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” was for PURPOSE. We were made for a mission: “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.” Our “spiritual house” is always under construction. Always adding on new rooms, new wings, new balconies, bathrooms and basements. Can we turn over the rolling stone, and commit to a journey that has no end until God’s purposes are accomplished within our community of faith?

2. Second, let’s turn over The Tombstone. Old cemeteries are history books carved in granite. Tombstones tell the stories of our ancestors: they document our journey from past to present. A community of faith cannot go forward without knowing where it has come from, without looking, as Isaiah states, “to the rock from whence we were hewn.” Our text today describes a wholly new temple design: an edifice set in spirit instead of stone. Can we turn over the tombstone so that we can live out of the past (but not in the past) as we move into the future?

3. Third, let’s turn over the Touchstone. The touchstone is that grounding point that everyone shares in common. The touchstone keeps us connected, even when our lives take us in very different directions. In a faith community the touchstone is cooperation and collaboration and connection, a commitment TOWARDS something instead of working AGAINST something. Every living stone in the foundation we’re building is going to have a

different shape, a different width, a different composition. But every stone works together to build up a structure with strength and presence – something none of us can do on our own. Can we turn over the touchstone so that we can build a structure together that none of us can build alone?

4. Fourth, let's turn over The Gallstone. No faith community should be content with turning over pails of pebbles. Agreeing on the paint color for the sanctuary – that's a pebble. Changing over to more efficient light bulbs – that's a pebble. Those are good things. Pebbles are good things. But our God is GREAT. Our God demands GREAT things. We need to see the big picture and be troubled by it, and commit ourselves to changing the world for God's dream. In other words, we need "gallstones," something that troubles our spirit at a deep level, because we know it's a problem far too large for any of us to solve. It's the grit in the oyster, that irritating grain of sand, that give the oyster the incentive to create the pearl. It's the grit in our souls that open us to the greatness of God, and God's abilities, when our own are so obviously inadequate. Can we turn over the gallstone to dream of the big picture, which Jesus called "the kingdom of God."

5. Fifth, let's turn over The Millstone: Sorry, but some things just take hard work. You can't learn a language without memorizing verb forms. You can't get your taxes done without crunching numbers. There is no such thing as an "easy birth." Bathrooms do not clean themselves.

Some metaphors make no sense. Ever hear the phrase: "worked like dogs." ...I can't think of a time when I saw our dog work. Do you have one that does? There is no getting around the need for discipline and hard work if real accomplishments are going to happen. A "spiritual house" is different than some "castle in the air." Can we turn over the millstone to turn dreams into realities?

6. Sixth, let's turn over The Limestone. Did you know that those elegant, elaborate repositories for bodies we see in museums called "sarcophagus" had their inner lining made of limestone. The reason behind that choice was that the lime ate away the flesh on the body very quickly. Within a month or so all that would be left inside were bones. "Sarcophagus" means flesh-eating, and the limestone slab did fast work on the dead. The thing is: time is short. Look at family pictures: your parents, your kids, your grandparents, your grand-kids. Events that seem like they happened yesterday are suddenly twenty years ago. We are called to build up the spiritual house, the many-roomed mansion that we are to be a part of. There is no building permit backlog forcing us to wait around. We must act today. We must act everyday. There is no time to waste in indecision, or second-guessing. Can we turn over the

limestone that reminds us that time is short, that NOW is the time we have to make a different world.

7. Seventh, let's turn over The Brimstone: Ever wonder why they are called "deviled eggs?" It's because of that rank smell of sulfur that permeates the kitchen and hangs on long after the hard-boiled eggs have been peeled and put away. We need to be able to recognize that sulfur smell, the devilish aroma of brimstone that can sneak in and stink up our best efforts. Every time we get too caught up in our own agenda, too pleased with our own efforts, too enamored of our own voice — we need to be able to get the whiff of brimstone breath and self-centeredness that comes with it. The only way to get the smell of sulfur out of the house is with open doors and fresh air. When brimstone wafts under your nose, it's time to get outside yourself and search out a fresh breeze. Can we turn over the brimstone and get outside of ourselves?

8. Eighth, Finally, let's turn over The Cornerstone: The cornerstone is the one and only stone that contains the qualities of all the other stones in the spiritual temple we are building. Some of these stones we've mentioned, others we haven't. Some say that cornerstone is better translated, "capstone." Whether "capstone" or "cornerstone," Jesus is the perfect and unblemished stone, the stone that is able to hold up the spiritual house without shifting or cracki9ng, keeping all who align themselves with him in perfect plumb with God's designs and intentions. Or to summarize everything up in the words of that old gospel hymn, "Jesus is the Cornerstone, came for sinners to atone, though rejected by his own, He became the Cornerstone."