

When I was out of town last week in Oregon, I took one exceptionally long hike with my family.

My older brother, Sterling, and I, started to have a long conversation about rocks.

I don't know how the subject came up, presumably because we were surrounded by rocks on our hike but it turns out that he knew a lot more about rocks than I did.

And so while we were hiking, he gave me a brief introduction to the world of rocks.

He told me that there are 3 kinds of rocks: igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic.

Igneous rocks are made when magma cools, often through volcanic activity.

They are very hard rocks, and granite is an example of igneous rock.

Sedimentary rocks are formed when loose sediment or debris gets compacted and cemented together over thousands of years.

They are very soft, and limestone is an example of sedimentary rock.

Lastly, metamorphic rocks are made in the core of the earth through heat and pressure, slate and marble are examples of metamorphic rocks.

There are many different types of rocks and we use them for different purposes depending on our needs, whether it's building a countertop or a sculpture or a baptismal font.

Rocks can either be in the way, or they can be helpful, depending on the context.

We want rocks when we are building a wall, but we don't want lots of rocks when we are trying to plant a garden.

In Iceland, they believe that elves live in and around rocks and boulders, so they are careful not to move them.

They will build roads, homes and driveways around big rocks.

So rocks and boulders can be problematic, or they can be a helpful resource.

Now, in a similar vein, the rock metaphor can go two ways.

If someone says they're like a rock, it could mean that they are stubborn and unchanging, an obstacle to getting things done.

Or, it could mean that they are sturdy, steadfast and resolute in their beliefs.

When the writer of 1 Peter says that we need to be like living stones, and that Jesus is the cornerstone, I trust that the writer meant the latter.

We are to be committed to our faith; each of us is a stone, which helps to build up the realm of God on earth, the realm of which Jesus is the cornerstone.

Now, the tricky part is that we are called to be builders in what can often feel like unwelcome or even hostile territory.

The first verse in this chapter that we didn't hear this morning says this, "*Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.*" (1 Peter 2: 1)

I am afraid that we live in a society that's made up of stones of malice, guile (which means slyness), insincerity and envy.

We live in a world in which we are called to be bigger, heavier stones than everyone else, stones that don't support others, but crush them in our pursuit of success.

Our world teaches us to get revenge against those who wrong us, to fear stones who don't look like us or walk through this world in the same way that we do.

In verse 11, the verse immediately after this passage, the writer of 1 Peter tells the new Christians, "*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.*"

Sometimes it feels like being a faithful Christian in our world today means that we are acting as aliens or exiles, we are in this world but not of it.

This is ironic since Christianity is such a major world religion, but that's on paper, that's how people fill out census sheets, unfortunately it's not how they live their lives day in and day out.

Being a Christian is not just a box to check or a label to claim, or a cultural identity, it's an entire life's calling.

As such, we are called to be living stones of tolerance, compassion, understanding, wonder rather than judgment, forgiveness rather than retribution.

And maybe more importantly, we are called to know our privilege, because that is the invisible force working in the world, which affects many of our relationships.

What the heck does that mean?

Well, in keeping with the stone metaphor, there are lots of things, which affect our level of privilege, and the more you have, the bigger the stone you are.

That means you take up more space, people have to navigate around you, and you might not even know you're in the way.

It means that your history, your identity, is the default in our society and anyone who is different has to understand their identity in comparison to you.

We all have privilege, whether because of the color of our skin, if you're white, or gender, if you're male, or sexual orientation, if you're heterosexual, or level of ability, if you're able-bodied and without cognitive impairments.

All these things determine how big we are, how much space we take up, either in a room, a meeting, a family dinner table or in society in general.

And if you are a big stone, that's okay, you can't change it, but you need to be aware of it.

If you are a big stone, you have more power, and our culture will tell you to use that power to squish or silence others.

But the church tells you to use that power to not only help others, but to hear their story, to understand how they see the world, to create space for those smaller stones, with less privilege, who might otherwise feel ignored or sidelined.

The earliest Christians were persecuted for their faith, and that was the intended audience of this letter.

I pray that we won't be persecuted for being Christians, but we might not receive material rewards on earth either.

This is why the author says that although Jesus was rejected by mortals, and I think that's a caution that we may well be too, that we must be built into a spiritual house to offer spiritual sacrifices.

Drawing upon the tradition of the Temple in Israel in which they did offer sacrifices, the writer calls us to offer our lives as a sacrifice to Jesus' message.

That doesn't mean we should literally lose our lives, but see each moment as an opportunity to follow Jesus' way, rather than the secular ways of this world.

We also need to be willing to offer sacrifices in order to follow Jesus, sacrifice money, wealth, prestige, ego.

We are called to use our lives as a cornerstone of Jesus' message.

Now, imagine that each community you are in, whether with friends or family or your work, you play a role in each of those groups, and you have a choice.

You can be a stumbling block towards God's love.

You can be mean, catty, competitive, rude, or malicious and envious, as the text says.

Or, you can be an unwavering rock of God's love and unconditional acceptance in each of those circles that you navigate through.

You can be the sensitive one, the empathetic one, the compassionate one, the generous one, the helpful one.

Be a cornerstone of God's love, not an impediment of it.

One of the many radical aspects of Jesus' message was that he didn't believe God was limited to the Temple.

The ancient Jewish tradition said that Yhwh was in the Temple and the priests had special access to God, which commoners didn't have.

Jesus challenged this theology with the belief that we all have access to God, as today's text says, "*you are a royal priesthood... God's own people...*" (1 Peter 2:9).

For one thing, God isn't relegated to the Temple, and for another thing, nobody has any more access to our Divine Creator than anyone else.

We are called to be the cornerstone of Jesus' love no matter where we are, to be priests who serve in this new Temple, which has no walls, no boundaries.

As a pastor, what I see as part of my role, is to help each of you understand that you are deeply loved and that you matter.

And you know what?

I don't have special powers, you can do this too, you can carry this love beyond these walls into all the circles you interact with throughout your week.

So be a stone, not a soft one that's easily eroded, like limestone.

Be a hard stone like granite, committed, with unwavering resolve, to spreading Jesus' message of radical love throughout the world.

And know your size.

If you're a big stone, look for the smaller ones around you, help them, give them voice, allow them to go where they need to go and say what they need to say, from the perspective of someone who has been silenced or sidelined.

Don't be swayed by the temptations of this world, by the winds of corruption or ego, but be a cornerstone of God's love, upon which others can depend.

As the famous phrase says, *"In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock."* Amen.