

Witness of the Stones

*Come to him, a living stone . . . chosen and precious in God's sight.
And like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house
(1 Peter 2:4-5)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on All Saints Sunday, **November 5, 2017**

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This is Strasbourg Cathedral in France, a place I've had the opportunity to visit twice in the past five years. The cathedral was begun in 1277, and when it reached 466 feet it became the tallest building in the world, a status it kept for 227 years, until 1874. I found my first visit there to be a surreal experience, sitting in the plaza below at precisely noon, the bells of the cathedral pealing. It was as if time, the passing of centuries, was being gathered into a single moment. Looking up

at the cathedral with the vantage point of this photo, I could see why Victor Hugo described it as a "gigantic and delicate marvel," its massive size complimented by a stunning intricacy of design.



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Sitting there, I began to wonder what

life was like for those building this cathedral seven centuries ago. How very different life must have been in those times, yet very much the same -- our humanity then, as now, orbiting through the same emotional constellations of living – a search for meaning, a pursuit of happiness, a desire for love, fear in the face of want or of danger and, of course, the spiritual impulse, the aspiration for transcendence, a quest symbolized by the architecture of these cathedrals, drawing our eyes heavenward.

*In the *For What It's Worth* department, aiding my imagination of Middle Age times was my reading then of Ken Follett's 1989 novel *Pillars of the Earth*, a story of the building of a

cathedral in 12th century England. Far from romanticizing the cathedral's construction, he made it earthy and gritty. *Pillars of the Earth*, along with its sequel, *World Without End*, are two of my favorite novels, and became an excellent television mini-series. I'm currently reading the recently released book to complete the trilogy, *Column of Fire*.

Back to my story . . . pondering in the plaza the building of a cathedral in the Middle Ages brought to mind a parable -- the *Parable of the Three Stonecutters*, which I shared in a shipboard lecture. Three stonecutters are asked how they might describe their work. The first responds, "You've got eyes! Can't you see? They bring me a rock. I cut, shape it. They take it away. Bring me another rock. Then another. Then another. I've been doing this since I was a boy and I'm stuck. Day after day, year after year. 'Til I die."

The second craftsman offers a resigned smile and says, "Well, I can't say I like my job any better. It is difficult work, and I too feel I'm growing old doing it. But I'm earning a living wage so that my family is cared for. We have a home, food on our table, our children growing strong. All in all, I'm thankful for the skills I have."

The third pauses, looks up at the unfinished cathedral yet obscured by immense scaffolding, and wears a look of fulfillment. "My work? I'm contributing to the building of something much bigger than myself -- gigantic, you see -- yet, look how very delicate is each small part. This cathedral will be lighthouse where people lost in dark places can find hope. I believe it will stand for a thousand years, and I am a part of that . . . every year, every century. Long after I am gone, my witness will speak from the stones of this place!"

If I could speak across seven centuries to that third stonecutter, I would say, "You are right, my friend. It does! Your witness yet speaks from the stones. So that one like myself, arriving not so much a tourist than a pilgrim seeking transformation, will sit 750 years later in the plaza which in your day was a muddy mess, but now filled with pizzerias and souvenir shops. This one will hear at noon the bells tolling, close his eyes, and imagine life in your time. In his mind the pizzeria will vanish and he will see instead the place where you sweated in the heat and shivered in the cold, where in light moments you joined in reverie with your companions, your nostrils filled with the stench of the beasts and your body dirtied by the messiness of building. This one will meander in the streets and alleys looking for elegant restaurants and quaint coffee houses, but recalling how these alleys were in your time the very arteries by which you and others arrived for your work and walked back, aching, to your homes.

"Yes, your witness speaks from the stones of this place, so that even after 750 years we are mesmerized by the sight, charmed by its sounds, inspired by its grandeur, and dare I say, changed. If I may use language current in my time -- what you did made a difference -- for me, and for millions who, seeing this soaring edifice, feel our soul's deepest aspirations kindled to know beyond our knowing.

"And know this, my friend. This church that was in your time *Still-a-Building*, is even yet, *Still-a-Building*. The scaffolding has not come down, now found in places you could never have imagined in the Year of our Lord 1277. On the other side of a globe you knew nothing of, even

in a gated village named Hot Springs, the bells are still a-tolling and will today, on All Saints' Day they will toll as a Witness of the Stones, declaring that the church is Still-a-building."

That third stonecutter realized that sometimes we're making a difference even when we don't immediately see it. Suppose someone interviewed you about your career. How would you define it? Perhaps there are moments when you felt the nobility of the third stonecutter, looking beyond yourself to the contribution you are making to the community, to the country, even to the world. Or, perhaps there are times that the only difference you can see you are making is that of the second stonecutter, putting food on the table. Then again, perhaps there are moments when you feel the heaviness of the first stonecutter, wondering, *"Does anything I do make a difference? I'm stuck in a cycle of uselessness -- rock after rock after endless rock!"*

May I tell you a story from my own career? Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, is one of my favorite preachers. Several years ago he wrote an essay titled *"Sometimes Ministry Stinks."* He spoke of a time early in his ministry, he still in his 20s, when he grew deeply discouraged and disillusioned, feeling too much of his time in ministry was being spent in tasks that were unimportant and menial, wasting his abilities.

Craig is about my age and, like me, began ministry early in life. Perhaps that's why his essay resonated so with me. I recognized right away the feeling he described. In 1981, already six years into pastoral ministry, I was 27 years old and found myself in ministry in LA (that's Lower Arkansas) at the bottom of the state (El Dorado) spending more and more segments of my day in things that, while I had found them exciting and challenging five years earlier, now seemed unimportant. I felt stuck, that as a pastor I was becoming a slave to things that weren't making a difference. I was on the verge of ministerial burnout at 27 years young! So, I left ministry to pursue advanced degrees in Hebrew at the University of Michigan. Bottom line, I was on a quest for something that seemed more important and fulfilling.

I've learned since that my coming to terms with the lesser-appreciated tasks of ministry, what Barnes calls the *"smelly"* tasks, was not unique for young ministers settling in to the prospect of a lifelong vocation. At 27 I was approaching that 10th year anniversary of high school graduation. As some of my closest friends from high school were now entering their bank, law, and corporate offices in Little Rock, or nearing the end of medical school and becoming interns in hospitals, I found myself on Monday in another committee meeting discussing things like carpet color in the Fellowship Hall, or refereeing Kitchen Use turf wars. On Tuesday afternoon I was visiting and holding the hand of Mrs. So and So in the nursing home or providing transport for an indigent person to the doctor, then on Wednesday night offering yet another inadequately polished devotional. Sermons and devotionals, which once I thrilled to shape, now seemed like those rocks. One shaped. Then another. Then endlessly another. So many.

Have you ever felt like that in your occupation, reaching a moment when the tasks which once excited you had come to weary you? Likely so. The daily-ness of ministry left me unfulfilled. I began questioning my sense of a Call, wondering if my impulses toward ministry, the Calling that so stirred me to the core of my being seven years earlier, may have been the misguided decision of a wobbly twenty-year-old spirituality. Something was missing. Had I chosen the

wrong path? Enough years had passed for my initial enthusiasm to wear thin, porous enough to allow doubts to seep in, daily enough to conjure feelings of being stuck. *“I’m trapped, but it’s all I know, so I’ll do this until I die.”* Seeking escape, my path took me to Ann Arbor. Academia would be my salvation from a perception of self-unimportance, an opportunity to really “make” something of myself, to make a difference in the world.

Rev. Barnes evidently experienced similar misgivings, but he had a better idea than escape. When his heart played host to those same feelings, he went to a veteran pastor, Bryant Kirkland, to seek godly counsel and wisdom. Craig remembers how Rev. Kirkland told him, *“Craig, if you get stuck holding the bedpan, carry it like a queen.”*

A veritable proverb, if you ask me. Rev. Kirkland explained to Craig that when one of his daughters had been born, he was impressed by the quality of care for his wife and baby. When he complimented the nursing supervisor she said, *“We tell our nurses that there are a lot of smelly jobs in our profession, but every job can be conducted with dignity. Our motto: If you get stuck holding the bedpan, carry it like a queen. Then the focus isn’t on the bedpan but on the graciousness of the one who is holding it.”* How like Jesus, who demonstrated the freedom of willing service by taking a towel and basin and carrying that basin like a bedpan as he washed the dusty feet of his disciples!

Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of *Saying Yes to Life In Spite of Everything*, wrote, *“the last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”* It’s true. We often don’t have a choice about our circumstances, but we always have a choice as to how those circumstances are allowed to affect our attitude. It is the essence of human freedom to choose our attitude in any circumstance. I love the saying once shared with me by a friend at a time when I needed to hear it, *“Things work out best for those who make the best of the way things work out.”*

May God give us eyes to see beyond the daily-ness of our tasks, to see that we are making a difference far beyond what we might imagine. I love the story of the Arkansas teacher who asked her class of 4th graders to name the four seasons, looking for Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. One little boy, though, answered, *“Deer season, Duck season, Turkey season, and Football season.”* Yes and, as a pastor, on these gorgeous November days I would add another season – the Annual Stewardship emphasis.

In two weeks we will bring our Estimate of Giving cards and consecrate them as a congregation. I encourage you toward faithful and generous giving, not out of a legal response of requirement, but rather a joyful response of gratitude in faith that your gift makes a difference, both within these walls and far, far beyond.

Let us have the eyes of this third stonecutter, to say of the church we are building, *“I am a part of that . . . every year, every century. Long after I am gone, my witness will speak from the stones of this place.”*