

“Faithfilled Stone Work”
preached by Rev. Elizabeth Macdonald

on Sunday, October 15, 2006
Living Stones Stewardship CampaignII – First Sunday

Biblical Texts: Ezekiel 36:26-27, 1Peter 2:4, 5, 4:8-11

Today’s readings of scripture challenge us with two very different, almost diametrically opposed images and understandings of stone. The ancient Israelite prophet Ezekiel warns of the risk, the danger of stone hearts. In Ezekiel’s day, exile in Babylon had left the people of Israel so defeated and despairing, it was as if their hearts had turned to stone. They no longer had the capacity to believe in God or trust in God’s or to honour the covenant God had made with them.

There are circumstances in our lives, situations facing people today that are having a similar effect – failing health, broken relationship, loss of income or financial security, lack of adequate food or shelter, experiences of violation or violence – any combination of these, any one of these can turn a person’s heart to stone, leaving them unable to believe or trust or love.

It is a devastating, terrifying situation to be in – partly because we human beings don’t have the resources, the capacity to get ourselves back on track. Ezekiel knew that. He also knew at the core of his being, that God does have that power. God’s indescribable inexhaustible, unconditional love has the power to remove any heart of stone and replace it with a new heart and a new spirit.

The new heart and the new spirit that God gave them allowed the people of Israel to survive Exile and eventually to return home to rebuild their lives, their temple, their relationship with God and one another. Their new God-given heart and spirit opened the door to new life.

The hope and promise that Ezekiel offered to his people is offered to us. Wherever suffering or injustice, hardship or heartache result in human hearts turning to stone the Spirit of God is at work giving a new heart and a new spirit. It may take time, it often takes a long time, but we can count on that promise being fulfilled.

Like many early Christians, the author of the letter known as First Peter had the experience of receiving a new heart and new spirit and in through relationship with the Risen Christ. It is not surprising that this writer sees stones not so much as danger or risk but as building material to be used in constructive, creative, life-giving ways.

The magnificent cathedral, Stephansdom, which stands in the heart of Vienna, is a stunning example of what can be built with stone. The interior stonework is particularly impressive, carvings in the walls that tell the story of our faith.

Peeking out from two places at the side of the pulpit and below the organ corbel are stone portraits of the man who skilfully crafted much of the stone work in the cathedral, Anton Pilgram. Clearly he wanted to be remembered. But there is nothing arrogant or pompous about his expression. And if you didn’t know where to look it would be easy to miss these portraits altogether.

I looked into the stone face of Anton Pilgram and heard him say across the centuries, “I was here, I was one of the hundreds who poured heart and soul and creative energy and sweat into building

this house to the glory and praise and honour of God. I am in these stones that you may encounter God and experience something of the mystery, the love, the truth, the hope of our faith.

Anton Pilgrim reminded me that the church is built not by a stream of nameless, faceless people, but by individuals who come with their particular longings and needs, who offer their unique gifts and skills and experiences, and share again and again of themselves in response to God's call, for the benefit of God's people, for the sake of God's world.

We are not called to build the church the way Anton Pilgrim did over 500 years ago. We are called to build community within this wonderful building and beyond this building, It will be in and through our acts of kindness and compassion; through the beauty of our music and art, our prayers and worship; through our efforts to achieve justice or establish peace; through our hospitality and generosity – through the countless ways we find to be with and for one another, and with and for God's people, especially those who are vulnerable or in need – we will leave our mark.

Like Anton Pilgram, we can say to those who have yet to discover Sydenham Street United Church, "I am in these stones that you may encounter God and experience something of the mystery, the love, the truth, the hope of our faith."

One of the things that saddens and disturbs me is when someone assumes they won't be missed if they stop coming to church or drop out of church activity. We are not nameless, faceless, generic seats that warm the pew. Each one of us comes here with particular longings and needs. We have unique gifts and skills and experiences to offer.

The rich and diverse range of longings, gifts, experiences across this congregation became evident yesterday as members of the Executive and Committees engaged in Asset Mapping. The first step in this process is to name assets and gifts – and much of what you bring was included. Then these assets and gifts were combined and connected in various ways that would support established and ongoing ministries and would lead us in different directions with new initiatives. You will be hearing more about this asset-mapping. What we realized was that we were just scratching the surface – there are so many assets, so much rich experience in this community.

We are all living stones! You are a living stone – vital and precious and irreplaceable – No one else can be who God created you to be. No one else can do what God is calling you to do. And you have work to do! We have work to do. Together! Faith-filled stone work! Let's get on with it!