



Rev. Chris Taylor - 10.20.19

"Five Smooth Stones"

Samuel 17:38-49 and 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

When David was going to confront Goliath, he chose five smooth stones from a dry creek bed to carry with him. For him, these were the essentials. They were all he needed as he faced the giant. The ensuing encounter changed the trajectory of David's life.

We all face giants at one point or another. They can come in all kinds of different forms: a challenge at work that feels insurmountable; a health crisis that casts our future in doubt; a loss that threatens to drown us in a sea of fathomless grief. Whatever the form, they do come for giants walk this land and confrontations with them are part of what it means to live in this broken, hurting world.

In his own confrontation, David knew that the key lay not in his own gifts, but in his relationship with God. There was no doubt on this point. As he put it, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam. 17:37). David knew he was just the instrument. It was God's presence and God's power that would make all the difference.

So for us, God is everything – that alpha and the omega; the beginning and the end. Just as it was for David, so it is with us: it is our relationship with God that is going to make the difference as we confront our giants and make our way through life. David had his five smooth stones. For us, it is five practices – five essentials – that help open our lives to God's presence and power.

There is this part of us that longs for the transcendent; an emptiness that can't be filled any other way. Only God can fill the deepest longings of our hearts, and it is Jesus who offers us the way. Through Jesus, through the forgiveness he came to offer, we find our way back to that relationship for which we were created. But this isn't something that just happens once and then we're done. No, if we are going to keep growing and keep opening our lives more and more to God, then we have to

find a way to keep making that same turn with which this journey began: the turn away from ourselves and towards our Creator.

This turn is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in the sixth chapter of his epistle to the Romans: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:3,4).

All this talk of death can sound morbid, but it actually holds the key to sustaining our relationship to the Lord. What Paul is saying is that when we first turn to Jesus there is a kind of death that comes with it – a death to ourselves. We are dying to that part of ourselves that wants to be in control; dying to that part that wants to live for ourselves alone; dying to that part that’s always crying out “What’s in it for me?” We are turning away from ourselves, crucifying that self with Christ upon the cross so that we might become alive to God. It is precisely then, at that moment, that a whole new life begins.

Here’s the thing: this death doesn’t happen just once. It is something that needs to keep happening again and again. And this, in essence, is what every spiritual practice has in common: they help us make a conscious shift from self to God. Prayer, service, fasting, fellowship, pilgrimage, worship – it doesn’t matter which discipline you are talking about, they all involve a kind of sacrifice; they all involve a kind of death to self. That is their power because this sacrifice is the very way of the cross. It is the way to which Christ calls us, and every time we make that sacrifice we are dying a little bit more to self that we might become a little bit more alive to God.

Consider, as one example of this dynamic, the act of giving. In this culture which so prizes the material, giving is one of the most powerful practices that we can embrace. We are constantly bombarded with the message that it is the things of this world that are going to make us happy. They won’t. They can’t. While they are intended by God to be a blessing, they were never meant to carry the weight of all our hopes and expectations.

So what happens when we give? We are, in fact, giving away the very thing this world values most! We are reminding ourselves that when it comes to satisfying our deepest longings the things of this world will always fall short. There is only One who can satisfy those longings. Only God can do it.

Our offerings each week, then, are an act of worship. When we make that pledge or write that check we are making a sacrifice; a sacrifice that expresses, in a very concrete way, our love and commitment and gratitude to God. And in that that moment we are putting God first. That's where the power lies. We are saying to ourselves and to all the world that God alone is Lord; that God alone can meet the deepest longings of our hearts. So in that moment, we are breaking the hold the things of this world have upon us. We are opening our lives more and more to the Creator of all that is.

People will sometimes ask me how much they should give. There is no one right answer to that. I can, however, tell you what Bonnie and I give and the thinking that lies behind it. This year we've pledged \$12,000 to Fox Chapel. We based that on Scripture's standard of the tithe, ten percent. We aren't legalistic about it. If you took my salary and added the value of the manse, our pledge is a bit less than ten percent. But if you took that same figure after taxes, then it is a little bit more. We do the same thing with Bonnie's salary and what we give to her church. As we prayed about it, those are the figures that felt right to us.

Trust me, that's a lot of money for us, but we do it because we believe with all our hearts that God is everything. We do it because God is the source of all that we value most. And we do it because we love this church and love what we see God doing here.

We haven't always given that kind of money. There were years when we were nowhere close to a tithe; one period in particular when we were overwhelmed with medical costs and college expenses. The tithe for us is not some law, heavy and oppressive and pushing down on top of us. God isn't going to love us any more or any less because of what we give. But we pay attention to this standard because we believe that like all the rest of God's guidance it is intended to be a blessing. It is offered to show us life at its best. So in any given year the question for us is "Given this standard and given what's going on in our lives at that time, what will best reflect our love for the Lord and the central place we want God to have?" That's what matters.

Our giving isn't about paying dues. The church isn't some country club or some other organization. No, the church is the very body of Christ, Christ's presence in this world. It is the one place where Christ has promised to be present and at work. What we give to the church, then, is first and foremost a gift to the Lord. It is one step we take to beat back the giants and open our lives more and more to the living God.

So we've talked about giving this morning, but giving is just one aspect of the larger practice with which we began; sacrifice. Sacrifice is the first of our five smooth stones, and you can't read Scripture without realizing that it stands at the very heart of what it means to follow Jesus.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Mt. 16:24, 25).

The message here is clear: it is in our sacrifices that we follow the way of Jesus, through our sacrifices that we open our lives more and more to God. And here is the good news, just as Jesus had to go through the cross to get to the resurrection, so for us it is through our sacrifices that we move towards that new life, that resurrected and abundant life that Jesus came to share.