

“Stones and Bones”

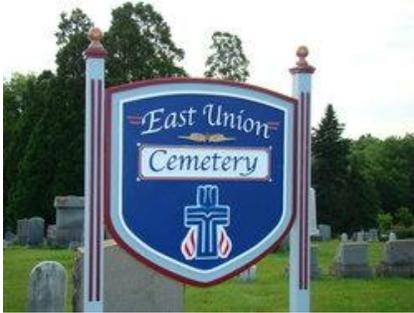
John 14:1-14 & 1 Peter 2:4-9

May 18, 2014 ~ Rev. James Ramsey

Today I'm thinking about Stones and Bones – the church, its building and its members. When we say “church” – it's never clear which one we mean. Are we talking about the physical structure or the spiritual community? Either way, we dare not lose sight that the Cornerstone is Christ. What has been built here rests on that cornerstone and owes its vitality to it.

Stones
- - -
BONES

We at East Union have a marvelous heritage, both in our buildings and grounds, but also in the history of our people.



We'll celebrate that briefly next Sunday with a memorial service in our Cemetery at 12:15. We'll join in prayer and acknowledge those who have come before us and the legacy they have left us in this place.

Our church was officially chartered in 1850. God's people have accomplished great things here as God's Spirit has pushed, pampered and prodded us to proclaim the Good News, serve our community, speak out for justice and peace, befriend the most vulnerable around us – children and youth, the hungry, the homeless, those with special needs.

We have been tempted over the years to rest on our laurels, to delight too much in past successes, to ignore the signs of change in our culture and resist the opportunities and challenges of the future. We have always been tempted... but we persevere, we keep the faith, we commit ourselves to the ongoing call of Christ Jesus.



That is why we would subject ourselves to a Strategic Planning Process – that is why we would invite Doug Portz to lead us, in surveys, research, interviews, Bible Study, focused prayer – so that we might discern anew God's voice, that we might consult our Compass and confirm our direction in Christ...This afternoon we take the next step in that process.



Rev. Dr. Doug Portz, of Pittsburgh Presbytery, will share with us the detailed results of our Cat Scan. We'll meet in Founders' Chapel at

4pm. Everyone will get a 30-page booklet of interpretation. I hope you can come.

Our Strategic Planning Team, along with others of you in the congregation who have chosen, have read and discussed a rather provocative book recently. It's titled THE PRESENT FUTURE: Six Tough Questions for the Church, by Reggie McNeal.

Most of us have found the book exhilarating and unsettling at the same time. Even though the book advocates some radical rethinking and some rather drastic changes, our discussion group agreed with many of its precepts, that we need to entertain more change than is comfortable for us, in order to stay relevant in the future. Consider these words from the preface:

"We think we are headed toward the future. The truth is, the future is headed toward us. And it's in a hurry (we know the universe is speeding up, not slowing down). We also generally think that the present makes sense only in light of the past. Again, we need to check our thinking. The present makes clearest sense in light of the future. We humans write history by looking at the past. God creates history ahead of time. He never forecasts. God always backcasts. He began with the end in mind. The future is always incipient in the present. Before the foundation of the world the Lamb was slain. Calvary was anticipated in God's kiss of life into Adam. The cross gains dimension silhouetted against the empty tomb. The empty tomb confirmed the invasion of the future into the present. When Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus, he realized the future had been fast-forwarded. That changed everything...It still does."



This is the perspective of faith. But this perspective gets bogged down in us. We get distracted. We veer off-track. We lose our bearings. We focus on those who have left our church. We stagger under crippling financial concerns – paying our staff, maintaining our buildings, financing our programs and funding our mission. We get distracted by internal conflict.

You've heard about troublesome church members who manage to upset their congregations. Every church has them.



But the people making trouble for the Abbey Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Bath, England, aren't current members but those from centuries past. The people causing problems aren't the deadbeats in the pews but the dead bodies in the basement. And they're threatening to upset the church in a quite literal way.

Bath Abbey is an Anglican parish, founded as a monastery in the seventh century. The Abbey has housed ongoing Christian worship ever since – that's 1400 years of uninterrupted worship. The current building is a Gothic cathedral more than 500 years old, but it sits on the remains of a massive Norman cathedral that predated it.

The problem is that, over the centuries, an estimated 6,000 people have been buried just below the stone flooring of the church. Over time, as those bodies were reduced to bones and as the graves settled, holes opened up beneath the floor, threatening the very stability of the building. Today, the likelihood that the floors could collapse beneath the feet of someone about to recite the Lord's Prayer on any given Sunday morning is very real and unsettling.



An extensive project is now underway to stabilize the edifice. It involves digging out much of what soil and disturbed human remains are under the floor, filling the voids and then putting that earth, human bones, bits of coffin handles and inscribed plaques, etc., back under the floor, and saying a prayer over the whole re-interment....This brings to mind our text

from Peter – and the idea of the members being part and parcel of the church. Particularly, it brings to light the metaphor of Christ as the Cornerstone, to whom we can come to be built "like living stones ... into a spiritual house."



Leaning on the Cornerstone, we make up the rest of the building -- not as dead bones, but living stones! We learn holiness, practice good deeds, foster spiritual growth -- supported by each other in this faith community, always undergirded by our foundation in Christ, ever seeking to discern where we fit into God's design.

Okay, that's what the Bible teaches...but research shows that church attendance, at least in the northern hemisphere, is dropping off. We certainly feel that here at East Union. National surveys report that a growing number of people are saying that they like Jesus but not the church.

More and more people in our culture, and more specifically, in our immediate community, reject the need of a church -- they don't see the advantage of our fellowship, our worship or any moral guidance we think we offer -- at least it doesn't take priority over Sunday morning soccer, or a host of other activities or pastimes. Many people these days would rather sleep-in!



They don't need the church...especially if they are comfortably introverted, have a close family and good friendships -- or maybe have a whole bunch of upright and supportive people who "like" them on Facebook!

What does the Bible say? Peter doesn't really talk about church attendance. Instead, he calls us to come to Christ the Cornerstone, and let ourselves, like living stones, be built into a spiritual house.

For many people, coming to Christ awakens a hunger to learn more and go deeper, and even find ways to serve, and those things bring us to church. But even more, they help to make us the church. Christ asks us to let ourselves be built into a spiritual house, part and parcel of



what God is building in this world in preparation for the next. God want us to be part of an edifice where people can meet God.

There's a story from the days of yore where a Spartan king boasted to a visiting monarch about the walls of Sparta. The visiting royal looked around but could see no barricade, and so he said, "Where are these walls about which you boast so much?"



The host pointed to his troops and said, "These are the walls of Sparta -- every man a brick."

That's a living wall, of course, but we shouldn't push that example too far. Sparta's "bricks" were mostly for defense, with few for civic, ethical or spiritual duties, which may be one reason Sparta's "wall" eventually failed. But God calls us to come to Christ with our varied gifts and talents and let ourselves be cemented into the structure of the church. Some of us may serve a defense-of-the-faith function, but more of us have other roles -- outreach, service, teaching, serving, caring, witness and the like.

Stones and Bones. Buildings and Burials...

When I think about the church of today and about the structural problems at Bath Cathedral, I like the musings of colleague Timothy Merrill. He said, "I wonder how many churches are in danger of collapsing because there are too many dead people undermining the structure. Despite



the physical problems of the cathedral, I don't mean dead people in the literal sense. But rather, people who are lifeless. People who come to church expecting to take, take, take, avail themselves of our programs, enjoy our activities, use our services, but give little or nothing back in return. People who are backbiting, complaining malcontents who stink up the whole atmosphere of the church's life." I wish I would have said that! There are churches like Merrill describes. He knows some. So do I. They're not pretty places.

Yet, even when East Union is less than pretty – I try not to despair. Do not let your hearts be troubled, as Jesus says. While there may be deadness in us and among us – I remind myself that we are living stones, not dead bones.

And even if we have dead bones rattling around us – God has an answer for that, too. Remember that memorable vision by the Prophet Ezekiel, looking out over the Valley of



Dry Bones? The question is: "Can these bones live?" God's word to the prophet is that, "I will make breath come into you and you will come to life." ...and "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live."

Thank God we have been given the Spirit of God who gives us breath and life. Thank God we have Jesus Christ, the master builder. We are Stones and Bones...living stones and revived bones, being built into a spiritual house.

