



# ELIZABETHTOWN CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

## *The Cornerstone...Living Stones...and Us!*

Psalm 118:22–24; 1 Peter 2:4–5

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## **THE STONE THAT WAS REJECTED BECAME THE HEAD OF THE CORNER.**

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Our main Scripture lesson for this morning is taken from 118 Psalm. This saying was not original with Jesus, as he referenced it in Matthew 21:42. He was quoting Scripture of his time. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.” Jesus and the Psalmist drew from an ancient story that was well known among the Hebrew people.

Its an interesting story to read—the building of Solomon’s Temple as recorded in 1 Kings 5:15–18 & 6:7. As the temple was being built, the quarry where the stones were dug was some distance from the sight. We read in 1 Kings 6:7, “When the house was built it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor ax nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple while it was being built.” As someone humorously noted, “What we have here is the first recorded ‘pre-fab construction’ anywhere!” (7 years and 10,000 workers).

It seems there was a large stone that didn’t have identification, as did all the other stones. So the workers and architects kept stumbling over this large stone. “Where does it go? Where does it fit?” It was a nuisance! So a worker went to the foreman who went to the site manager and he went to the chief architect and word finally shouted out, “Take this stone and push it off to the side. It doesn’t belong here!”

This particular key-shaped stone was a wedge piece at the top of the arch, the one holding the other pieces in place. As they were finishing the construction, perhaps getting ready to take the scaffolding down, this key piece came up missing and the workers were asked to find it. Eventually the discarded stone was found. The stone the experts had cast aside, this rough-hewn piece of granite everyone kept stumbling over, ultimately became the head-stone, or key-stone. **The stone that was rejected became the head of the corner.** (Hold that thought.)

Transition to a more personal story: Our family moved to a farm in West Central Wisconsin in 1952. Dad was a bi-vocational minister/farmer. My two older brothers, John

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and Ralph and I (plus 2–4 foster children), all went to a one-room country grade school. We worked hard but enjoyed being “free-range” kids!

In 1957, I was baptized in Wolfe River, which coursed its way through a farm, with a herd of cattle upstream and in the water. As I walked down into the muddy, chilly water, I noticed UFO’s. Pause—Unidentified Floating Objects! After being dunked three times forward in this suspicious-looking water making promises I hardly understood, I walked out of the water on a long 60-year journey of constant discovery of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. As a 12-year old, I had NO clue how starkly this baptismal water would become a **metaphor for the messiness of ministry!** (Ministers, current and retired, you know what I am talking about!)

This journey eventually led me to Bethany Theological Seminary in 1973, with a determination that I would never, ever be a minister! I had seen too much distress and pain in the lives of my parents, to ever want to be a minister. (Eves-dropping through the hot air register and attending church council meetings.) However, at seminary a miracle occurred! After nine months of being challenged by faculty, staff, and students, I was cautioned to not base my future on past bad experiences in the shadow of my parents, but rather encouraged to embracing the giftedness within. It was a discerning community of faith that identified gifts for ministry, much the same way our Ministry Calling Committee functions. It’s an excellent plan!

The past 42 years of ministry have included pastoral ministry in two congregations; serving as national staff for the denomination (BVS & Office of Ministry); and 14 years as a District Executive. During these years, I mostly treasured the opportunity to serve the wider church family. While not always easy, ministry was seldom boring.

Consider two contrasting images that you may also have noticed. At many levels of the church, I experienced first-hand the erosion in loyalty to the Church of the Brethren and its historic values, beliefs, and practices. I witnessed painful church

divisions over issues of church leadership. I experienced the darker side (underbelly) of the church when persons and personalities clashed and became polarized over theology, social issues of the day, human sexuality and militarism, issues of finances, and yes, even worship styles.

However, I also had the joy of seeing a multitude of persons who do cherish the church, its heritage, core values, beliefs, and practices. I have witnessed a host of dedicated persons who provide a significant ministry of volunteerism for district and denominational ministries and related ministry agencies of the CoB. I have had the joy of experiencing healthy congregational life much like we experience here at Elizabethtown. In the CoB there are an abundance of opportunities for mission work, disaster relief, and Brethren Volunteer Service engagements!

Yes, I would agree that there are many persons who are cynical about the state of the church at the present time. Many within the church just can't seem to move beyond the politics of human sexuality and constant disagreements over Biblical Authority.

Yet, I ponder—what would be additional avenues of hope that would guide our beloved denomination into new adventures in faithful living, *providing strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*, as the beloved hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” suggests? What avenues of hope do you see?

Hear this modest proposal. Remember the stone that was rejected? Of all the boyhood farm chores engaging our family, the one I most disliked, next to pitching manure, milking cows, and mending fence, was picking stones. Each year the spring frost stirred up a new crop of stones to the surface on one particular 30-acre field near the woods. The entire family spent hours picking up small fist-sized rocks and small boulders the size of a human head, filling a large wagon bed about a foot deep. Each load was then emptied, by hand, onto a large rock-pile at the edge of the field.

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As a teenager, I considered the stones to be a real nuisance. When I complained about the drudgery of the task, dad would firmly say that someday he would need the rocks for other useful things. Dad had a bigger vision. Moms and dads, grandparents, aunts and uncles, always have bigger visions don't they? Well, guess what happened?

Eventually, just as dad promised, we went back to that huge rock pile, re-loaded the stones by hand, load after dreary load, and hauled them back to the barnyard. There we mixed these rocks with cement, gravel, and rebar to form solid foundations for a forty-foot silo, a garage, a corn-crib, and two pole barns! The stones that I had rejected as being worthless and a nuisance became an important recycled ingredient in forming the foundation and support system for essential farm buildings. The stumbling stones became building blocks. As sung earlier, "The building block that was rejected became the cornerstone of a whole new world." (Stookey)

When I think about the present state of the church, I can't help but think of those formative years. That which I disliked and thought was inconvenient, and something of little value, dad had a better plan. Surely, God has bigger plans, future plans for the church! The cornerstone referenced in Scripture was a direct metaphor for Jesus, who was rejected by mortals yet made the chief cornerstone by God.

Repeatedly in Scripture, God takes that which is regarded as inconvenient, unclean, sinful, unworthy, broken, stumbling blocks, and transforms them into something beautiful, precious, and holy. (Vision of Peter, Acts 11:1-18. Peter resisted. God commanded: "What God has cleansed you must not call unclean.")

Just ponder the significance of how Jesus, in his short, three-year ministry, extended a hand of healing, care, reconciliation, and friendship to the least and the last, to women and children, to the homeless and the diseased, to the outcast of society, daily stumbling stones for many. But Jesus embraced these outcasts of society, these inconvenient stumbling blocks

and transformed them into persons of beauty, precious, and holy in God's sight!

One thing that infuriated the Pharisees so much was when Jesus claimed the harlots, the publicans, the poor, the sinners and Gentiles were getting into the kingdom AHEAD of the kingdom's own Jewish children. (Matthew 21:31-32) The Pharisees said to one another, "Look the world has gone after him. We can do nothing!" (John 21:19) An exaggeration? Sure, but something to exaggerate about!

**Here is a question to ponder**, as the church continues to struggle with present-day issues and challenges. Do we reject these "inconvenient stones" that the cultural frost nudges to the surface each year and then relegate them to the rock pile outside the church? Or, do we welcome these "stones" as an essential part of the conversations that surround the formation of our faith, bound and strengthened by the unifying "cement/glue" of the Spirit?

Our New Testament lesson for today highlights this contrast: (1 Peter 2:4-5) "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be build into a spiritual house..."

Perhaps in your own life, you have felt on the fringes of the church? Like a stone that has been cast aside? And some kind soul, embraces you with loving arms, recognizing the spiritual gifts within, and welcomes you into the family of faith! Make sense? Though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight.

Today, let's be thankful for a legacy of compassion and service for all the precious folks God sends to our doors. "Peace, Service, and Openness to all." Within the CoB we have excelled in our ministries of care and compassion for the refugee, feeding the hungry, caring for children, responding to natural disasters, and a host of peace and service ministries that reflect the compassion of Christ.

And yet, let's be honest, as a denomination we have not been very successful in welcoming our LGBTQ neighbors into our

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circles of care...though rejected by mortals, yet precious in God's sight. We have not been very successful or faithful in recognizing the spiritual gifts and creative energies such persons could share as fully integrated members of our faith communities. The amended Human Sexuality paper of 1983 (36 years ago) comes close to relegating our LGBTQ sisters and brothers to the rock heap outside the church when we severely limit their participation within the life of congregations, districts, and denominational ministries—implying an unspoken but very real second-class membership. (see endnotes article) The challenge, as I see it, with the section on *The Church's Response*, suggests that one's identity as a sexual human being for LGBTQ persons is a “lifestyle option” rather than recognizing one's sexual identity as a gift from God! Though rejected by mortals, yet precious in God's sight.

**Two questions to ponder**—two “take-home” thoughts as we continually strive to seek the mind of Christ as we wrestle with the weighty stone-like issues of the day. And you can name them on by one.

1. “How can we conduct ourselves in our churches, our districts, and at Annual Conference in ways that display our best understanding of what the New Testament would expect from us as members of a community of faith?” (Earle Fike Jr.)
2. How do we “hold one another in love and fellowship...in moments of both gentle agreement AND vigorous challenge?” (Earle Fike Jr.)

Why are these questions important? “Because the answers will determine how we worship together, how we serve one another, how we welcome those whom God sends to us, and how we do business together at all levels of the church.” (Earle Fike Jr.)

They are important because how we treat one another will illustrate the extent we are truly guided by God's Spirit. What may seem to be stones (remember the stones?) or issues of

inconvenience may become “living stones” that have the possibility within them of providing richness, and texture, and support to strengthen and bond Brethren together, even in our most vigorous conversations.

Yes, this is a difficult time for our church, even in the midst of discovering a Compelling Vision for the denomination. God calls, even commands, that we prove our love for God in the character of our relationship to our sisters and brothers—even in moments of disagreement. These are actions that give Christians hope in a challenging world because of “the hope that is within each one us” (1 Peter 3:15). As followers of Jesus, as a disciple of Christ, we can do no other! We can do no other! Amen.

## **END NOTES**

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Song: *The Building Block*, written by Noel Paul Stookey © 1977 Public Domain Foundation, Inc.

Additional Scripture References regarding the “stone that was rejected.”

Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:7–8

An excellent article regarding forbearance—*The Recovery of Brethren Forbearance—A Call for a return to a helpful historic Church of the Brethren tradition*. Written by Earle Fike Jr. Assisted by Elaine Sollenberger, William Eberly, and Jim Lehman. I am not sure of the year.

The three quotes from Earle Fike Jr., are taken from a longer article that he wrote several years ago. I can no longer recall the title of the article or its context. I did write these noted down, but failed to include the exact source.

Note: those who heard the sermon, and have then read the text, will notice that I did not follow the text exactly as written, so there will be additional nuanced information in the spoken word. I did make reference to the Brethren Mennonite Council (BMC) and the number of congregations who have joined the Supportive Communities Network—51 congregations and 2 Brethren Universities. Verified by Carol Wise, Director of BMC.





