

“Turning Stones into Bread”

John 8:1-11

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I have an important announcement to make this morning. The Stone Age has ended. To which even a person with almost no knowledge or understanding of archaeology might say, “No duh!” The Stone Age was marked by three periods: The Palaeolithic, (Old Stone Age) which was some 350,000 years ago; the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age of 10,000 years ago, and the Neolithic, the New Stone Age, of some 5,000 years ago.

Thanks to the website of the Weston Museum in North Somerset, England, I was able to do a quick survey of the facts that marked the Stone Age.

- During the early periods of the Stone Age people were nomadic hunter-gatherers, following animals to hunt and gathering fruit, nuts and berries.
- Humans during the Stone Age fell into the categories of Tool-makers (called homo habilis), Fire-makers (called homo erectus), Neanderthals (called homo neanderthalensis) and Modern humans (called homo sapiens). The last one is us!
- Flint was used for making tools, during the Neolithic period they began to domesticate animals, and they lived in settled communities.

Whatever they did and however they did it, the Stone Age all came to an end some 5,000 years ago. So, I don't expect my announcement that the Stone Age has come to an end will create much of a ripple or make much of an impact. But I am referring to another Stone Age, and the ending of the Stone Age I am referring to has sent ripples out to the farthest reaches of humanity and the ending of the Stone Age I am referring to has made an impact that has changed the course of life for countless people, and people groups. And while the Weston Museum in North Somerset, England informs us that the ending of the Stone Age they are reporting on could vary by as much as 2,000 to 4,000 years, I

can tell you exactly when the Stone Age I am referring to came to an abrupt end. I can tell you exactly when the Stone Age I am referring to came to a dramatic end. And I can tell you that the ending of the Stone Age I am referring to opened the door, and paved the way for amazing transformations in human relationships, for things like reconciliation and restoration and peacemaking and healing, and above all, for forgiveness.

The Stone Age I am referring to was established with the handing down of the Ten Commandments to Moses during his time on Mount Sinai. Those Ten Commandments are given in sixteen verses in Exodus chapter 20, and again in sixteen verses in Deuteronomy chapter 5. Along with the sixteen verses in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, there are myriad and multiple other commandments that were given during those days of the Exodus and the journey toward the Promised Land. Some of those commandments established the Stone Age to which I am referring. Such as...

- If a bull gores a man or woman to death, the bull is to be stoned to death...but the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. (Exodus 21:28)
- However, if the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept the bull penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull is to be stone and its owner also. (Exodus 21:28)
- Later we read that if any Israelite follows the pattern of the vile false god named Molek and ends up sacrificing their children to the god Molek, the members of the community are to stone that person. (Leviticus 20:2)
- If a man or a woman is a medium or a spiritist, they are to be stoned to death. (Leviticus 20:27)
- Anyone who blasphemes the Lord is to be stoned to death. (Leviticus 24:16)
- If someone tries to lure an Israelite to worship a false god, you guessed it...stone them to death. (Deuteronomy 13:10)

- If there is a rebellious son, a stubborn and rebellious son, a son who will not obey, who is a glutton and a drunkard, then all the men of the town are to stone him to death. (Deuteronomy 21:21)
- And in Deuteronomy 22, we read that if a man and a woman are caught in adultery, “You shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death.” (Deuteronomy 22:13-30)

This Stone Age, which understandably makes us very uncomfortable, which seems extremely harsh and vindictive and judgmental, this Stone Age endured more than a thousand years. But this Stone Age came to an abrupt end, and I can tell you exactly when this Stone Age ended. Listen to the words of John 8.

“At dawn Jesus appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing Jesus.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again, he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’” (John 8:2-11) And with that incident, and with those words of Jesus about the one who is without sin casting the first stone, at that exact moment, at that exact time, with that woman caught in adultery, the Stone Age came to a sudden and abrupt end.

There is a beautiful and blessed irony that comes from the ending of the Stone Age. No stone was cast that day. And yet the ripples from

this encounter between a crowd bent on stoning a woman caught in adultery and Jesus the Son of God who is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world and this woman, this single woman caught in a transgression that according to the rules of the Stone Age required her to be stoned to death, the ripples of the stones that were never cast that day have spread not only to the ends of the earth, but to places of the deepest hurt and woundedness and violence and aggression. Normally a stone is cast into the water and then you see the ripples. That day no stone was cast, but oh the ripples, oh the lifegiving ripples that have accompanied the ending of the Stone Age have made such a difference in the lives of so many.

The ripples of the ending of that Stone Age washed upon the shores of the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. *Amish Grace* tells the story of the horrible act of violence that was carried out at the schoolhouse in that Amish Community.

“Amish. School. Shooting. Never did we imagine that these three words would appear together. But the unimaginable turned real on October 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into the Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Five schoolgirls died that day, and five others were seriously wounded. Turning a tranquil schoolhouse into a house of horrors, Roberts shattered a reassuring American myth—that the Old Order Amish remain isolated from the problems of the larger world.

The Amish rely less on that myth than do those who watch them from afar. In fact, their history reminds them that even the most determined efforts to remain separate from the world and its iniquities are not foolproof. The Nickel Mines Amish certainly didn't anticipate the horror of October 2. They were, however, uncommonly prepared to respond to it with graciousness, forbearance, and love. Indeed, the biggest surprise at Nickel Mines was not the intrusion of evil but the Amish response. The biggest surprise was Amish grace.

This book explains the Amish reaction to the Nickel Mines shooting, especially their forgiveness of the killer and their expressions

of grace to his family...”¹ The story that unfolds is a story that recognizes a community that does not live in the Stone Age. Hearing the command of Jesus to forgive 7X70, hearing Jesus teach about turning the other cheek, and clinging to the story from John 8 where Jesus dramatically brings the Stone Age to an end, this community of Christians practiced forgiveness and reconciliation in the midst of a horrible act of violence that brought precious lives to an end. By the grace of God, this community chose not to cast stones, but to seek forgiveness. The stone that was never cast in John 8 is a stone that has sent ripples that reach to where in response to the darkest deeds, followers of Christ practice forgiveness.

The ripples of the stone that was never cast washed upon the shores of South Africa. The long struggle against Apartheid is well known, and it leads to the question, “How does a nation experience healing from a scar so deep and painful?” Some favored trials against perpetrators like the ones in Nuremburg, with the focus on justice and punishment. Others favored a general amnesty, simply wiping out the crimes with a wave of the hand, with the focus on forgiveness and hoping everyone would forget or develop a case of amnesia. Instead of either of these two options, the country instead set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where those who would confess their offenses openly and before the ones they had harmed would receive amnesty. Offenders and victims would see each other face to face and through confession and the opportunity for forgiveness the hope was there would be both truth and reconciliation.

Desmond Tutu describes this journey toward truth and reconciliation in his moving book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. He, like so many in South Africa, leaned upon the good news of the gospel, the witness that Jesus Christ is the one who unbinds even the most messy and knotted up of relationships, that Jesus Christ releases and sets free the oppressed. When I read one story in particular I was reminded how powerful the love of Christ is that overcomes deep wounds and bitter oppression.

¹Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaer-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, p. XI.

A white officer was brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to confess his role in the Bisho massacre. This man was a white officer, but under his command had been black soldiers. These black soldiers had been ordered to fire on unarmed black demonstrators and 28 unarmed demonstrators had died. After the white officer spoke, the black soldiers would step forward. The room that day was packed with a black crowd, many whom had lost loved ones in the massacre. Tutu describes the tension in the room as palpable. The white officer spoke:

“I say we are sorry. I say the burden of the Bisho massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We cannot wish it away. It happened. But please, I ask specifically the victims not forget, I cannot ask this, but to forgive us, to get the soldiers back into the community, accept them fully to try to understand also the pressure they were under then. This is all I can do. I’m sorry, this I can say. I’m sorry.”

Tutu watched this testimony take place. He writes, “That crowd, which had been close to lynching them, did something quite unexpected. It broke into thunderous applause! Unbelievable. The mood change was startling. The colonel’s colleagues joined him in apologizing, and when the applause died down I (Tutu) said:

‘Can we just keep a moment’s silence, please, because we are dealing with things that are very, very deep. It isn’t easy, as we all know, to ask for forgiveness, and it is also not easy to forgive, but we are a people who know that when someone cannot be forgiven there is no future.’”² Experiences like that, real life experiences where the bitter hatred had run so deep, and yet forgiveness ran deeper, experiences like that send out ripples that not only land on the shores of South Africa, they wash up on our feet and remind us that when forgiveness is practiced, we are standing on holy ground.

During World War II, something amazing happened on the streets of Moscow. It was 1941. Twenty thousand German army prisoners were

² Desmon Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 150, 151.

to be marched through the streets in front of a population who had experienced cruel treatment at the hands of Nazi Germany.

The pavements were crowded that day, mainly with women and children, those who had borne the brunt of the terrible suffering. Most of their menfolk were dead. Almost everyone had lost a husband, a son; and many had lost mothers, sisters, daughters because of this army, these people who were going to march down this street. You can imagine something of the atmosphere that day. At last they were going to see their hated enemy. There were angry mutterings and shouts of hate as the first of that defeated army, the Generals, prisoners yet still arrogant, strutted at the fore. People spat in the snow. But then came the soldiers. And they were just boys really. Shuffling through the snow, their feet frostbitten, wrapped in newspapers. Many of them on makeshift crutches, others being led blind by one of their mates. And silence fell, and all you could hear was the shuffling of feet and the thumping of crutches. The shuffling of a defeated army of broken young boys. Then there was sudden movement. A woman, an old babushka, pushed herself through the crowd to the Russian soldiers guarding the pavement and said, 'Let me through.' Then this bent old woman rushed across to one of the gaunt German prisoners, and everybody held their breath. What was she going to do? Slap him? Spit on him? She reached into her shawl and took out a crust of black bread, which she then pushed awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And all of a sudden from every direction, women began to hand over perhaps a cigarette, perhaps some bread, perhaps a piece of fish; and somehow the hatred was gone, enemies had ceased to be enemies. Why? Because one person, such an ordinary person, intervened into that cycle of hate and hurt and revenge with a simple act of pardoning love. That's all."³ On the streets of Moscow, in the midst of a terrible war, the ripples of the stone that was never cast washed over a parade of

³ Peter Storey, *With God in the Crucible*, 100.

German prisoners and for that one moment the cycle of hate and hurt and revenge was broken.

The old babushka awkwardly pushed a crust of black bread and stuffed it into the pocket of a soldier. I mentioned earlier the irony, the beautiful and blessed irony of how a stone that was never cast has caused such a ripple effect, ripples reaching into war-torn streets of Moscow, ripples washing upon the shores of South Africa as a nation works to move beyond the hurtful practices of apartheid, ripples in a small community of Amish people devastated by a killer who shattered the safety of a school house. Here is another beautiful and blessed irony. In a very real way, when Jesus said his words about casting the first stone, words that led to an entire crowd walking away without casting a stone, in a very real way Jesus turned stones into bread. Jesus didn't do it on the devil's terms. Jesus did it on his own terms. Instead of the followers of Jesus being a group of people who cast stones, the followers of Jesus are a community of people, and individual people, who put down the stones of judgment and pick up the bread of life and share that bread wherever they go and with whomever they meet. And an old babushka sat down whatever stones she was tempted to carry as she saw her enemies march before her, and instead of a stone, she stuffed a crust of black bread into the pocket of a soldier.

Two women, both of them thoughtful and very devout women of God, both of them Christian, had a falling out. A situation caused them to be filled with bitterness toward one another. I felt helpless as the pastor...not of this church...of an earlier church. I prayed that they would reconcile. I gently suggested that they should reconcile. And I quietly hoped that they would reconcile. But years went by. One night we were at a special worship service, the Maundy Thursday worship service. Both of these women were in attendance. One sat to the far left. The other sat to the far right. I just nodded my head and mourned at how hard it can be to forgive.

On Maundy Thursday we celebrate the Lord's Supper. That year, instead of serving everyone in our traditional manner, we served communion by intinction. We invited people to come forward and take a piece of the bread, from a common loaf, from one loaf, and dip the bread

into the common cup, the one cup, and then to eat the bread and the cup before they returned to their seats. People started to come forward from both sides of the church. I was busy serving, but I couldn't help but notice that these two women seemed destined for a collision. They made their way to the middle, almost at the same time. They made their way to the front, almost at the same time. Meaning they were side by side as they approached the Lord's Table.

They were both very serious women of faith. They were making their way to the table with their heads bowed in worshipful reverence. They didn't see each other. Until at the last minute they looked up, and they saw the face of a person they just couldn't forgive. In that awkward, tense, and stressful moment, a wave washed over those two dear women of faith. It was like a ripple, gently touching their hearts and healing their spirits. They saw each other, they nodded, they reached out a hand for just a moment, and as it has happened so many times before, and as it will surely happen so many times again, Jesus turned stones into bread. They found forgiveness and reconciliation through the Body and the Blood of Jesus Christ.

It must drive the devil crazy, knowing that Jesus would not turn stones to bread when the devil was hard at work tempting our Lord and our Savior.

And it must make our Lord and Savior so happy, so joyful, when we embrace this powerful story in which Jesus really does turn stones into bread, empowering us to move beyond vengeance and retribution and judgment and violence, and equipping us to bring healing and hope to a broken world.

For a stone that was never thrown, the words of Jesus have caused a ripple effect that will keep on spreading and growing until the great and glorious day when he returns and makes all things right.