

From These Stones

[Matthew 3:1-17](#)

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When I was newly-minted pastor, I was serving a church in Minneapolis and there was a member there who taught me a lot. Her name was Harriet. She was a widow living by herself in a big beautiful house a few blocks from the church. Harriet was tiny and fierce and, despite being a longtime Minnesotan, she was one of the most blunt people I have ever known. I was terrified of her.

One of the best things about Harriet was that, at some point in her life, she custom-ordered a dozen bright, red buttons emblazoned with the words, "I'm Outraged!" *Big exclamation point*. She pinned them to all her clothes, her jackets, her hats, and wore at least one at all times. You couldn't miss the message. If you asked her, "Harriet, why are you outraged?", she'd pin you with a look of complete disdain and say, "Aren't YOU?"

From Harriet's point of view, if you weren't outraged, you weren't paying attention. Harriet paid attention. She cared deeply

about the anti-war movement, racial and economic justice, immigrant rights, workers' rights, women's rights, and the environment. She watched what was happening in her city, her state, her country, and the world, and she wasn't pleased with what she saw. And she wasn't going to pretend otherwise, or play nice, or smile and nod. No, Harriet wouldn't let anyone forget that something was profoundly out of order with our world, and the cause was human greed and corruption and apathy.

And she was furious about it. See, I think that Harriet had a deep, clear-eyed, biblical faith about how the world *should* be: she believed that, following the will of God, the nations should be striving for peace, not war; she believed that resources should go toward serving the most vulnerable among us; she believed that humans should be good stewards of creation. When Harriet gazed upon the evidence of human abuse and negligence around her, I think she was outraged not merely on her own behalf, but on behalf of *God*.

I don't know if Harriet would like this comparison, but she reminds me of John the Baptist. She was much better dressed and groomed, but I think Harriet and John the Baptist share a certain

quality, and that quality is an utter willingness to make others uncomfortable for the sake of God's Kingdom.

I think John the Baptist would proudly wear an "I'm Outraged!" button if he could stick one on his camel's hair coat. But he didn't have a button so he uses words instead.

And boy, does he ever. "Repent!" says John, and we all say, "No thanks!" and walk past him, as we might any noisy street preacher on the corner. I've done that myself--walked by, ducked my head, avoided eye contact--many times. As a queer woman, as a supporter of people of all faiths and no faith, I'm deeply offended by that type of evangelism, if you can call it that. In many ways, I've made it my life's work to embody a different type of Christianity. Several weeks ago, I saw a picture on Facebook of a man on a street corner holding a sign that said, "If you don't teach your children to obey Jesus, the devil will teach them evolution, psychology, sexuality, and witchcraft." If Harry Potter counts as witchcraft, then you've described the interests of many United Church of Christ pastors I know, including myself.

But here's the thing about John the Baptist: he isn't a Christian fundamentalist yelling on the street of a modern American city. He isn't even a Christian. He's a Jew speaking to other Jews about yet another Jew named Jesus. And the Gospel of Matthew is intended for an audience of Jews who are wondering: who is this Jesus guy, and why should we care?

And Matthew's answer to that question is this: you should care because, if you want to be in right-relationship with God, it is not enough simply to be Jews, the children of Abraham. John the Baptist wants his audience to imagine themselves out in the cold, outside the family, outside the covenant, outside God's people. This is a big deal.

You see, that original audience was made up of people who spent every day trying to be good, observant Jews. And the thing is, Matthew doesn't have anything against that as such. But he believes that being descendants of Father Abraham is not enough: it's a mistake for them to assume that their relationship with God is a done deal. "Far from it!" says John. John says, 'Picture yourselves standing, at least for a little while, on the margins. On the outside.

You vipers! You see yourselves as the wheat; but what if you're really the chaff?'

It sounds incredibly harsh. And it is. But, as always, context is everything. When Matthew put these words into John the Baptist's mouth, it's important to remember that the purpose wasn't to frighten his original audience into converting from Judaism to Christianity. In fact, Christianity--as we understand it--didn't yet exist.

The Jesus movement was one of several Jewish messianic movements that had bubbled up under Roman occupation of Palestine. John the Baptist addresses a people trying to make sense of a violent, unjust, changing world and their place in it. The Jews had known injustice for a long, long time, having been enslaved by Egypt, crushed by Babylon, and squeezed by Rome. They wanted deliverance. They wanted relief. That was their deepest hope. That was their passion.

And Matthew is saying, through the outraged voice of John the Baptist, that the true children of Abraham are those who, like old Abraham and Sarah his companion, can step willingly outside their

safe circles, outside their sense of belonging to the chosen people, outside their home, into the wilderness, into the desert, carrying with them nothing but the promise that God will somehow care for them and bring them home.

*That's what it's going to take to be people of God in this time,* John seems to be saying. You need to look at the state of the world with clear eyes while placing radical trust in God through the person of Jesus. You need to believe that God can raise up *anything* to life; even mere *stones*.

As modern listeners to John the Baptist's word, I think our assignment is this: to search inside ourselves for such stones, rocks, lumps of cold, gritty hardness. A stone, for John, is the *unlikeliest* of all possible materials for inclusion in God's Kingdom. And that is precisely what draws God to us, says John. Those parts of ourselves that seem least useful, least full of life, most in need of transformation. And there's plenty of stone available in every one of us.

Our stones have names: complacency. Denial. Guilt. Paralysis. Self-loathing. Anything that weighs us down, that makes us inert,

and prevent us from moving and growing and living. God wants to work with *those* stones, turn them into something beautiful.

So, I believe that, unlike some other street preachers you may have encountered, John's call to repentance isn't really about taking on more shame. It's about letting shame go and being reborn in grace, so that we can be the people God wants us to be, and build the world God wants us to build.

Even John the Baptist has a stone within him, an inner resistance which at first prevents him from understanding his full role in bringing about God's Kingdom. When Jesus comes to him to be baptized, he initially refuses. "I need to be baptized by *you*, and do you come to me?" In the other Gospels, John describes himself as unworthy to tie Jesus' sandals.

But Jesus says he must be baptised by John "to fulfill all righteousness." In Matthew's language, it means "to bring to fullness all justice." When Jesus gets baptized, he is willingly beginning his ministry to those for whom justice has been denied: the lost and the sorrowful, the broken and the outsiders. And he pursues this ministry all the way to the cross.

Harriet, my beloved and outraged church member, died several years ago. Sometimes, I shudder to think what she would make of this bizarre and disturbing historical moment that we are in right now. She'd be just *covered* with buttons.

This reminds of a conversation I had with another beloved--but less terrifying--church member the other day. Janet Muth and I were discussing how, lately, the state of the world seems worse, though we both felt that was an illusion. It isn't that *everything* is worse; it's that the veil is being pulled back, and everyone's awareness is heightened. More people are paying attention. We're understanding--now more than ever--the long-term consequences of inequality and injustice on human and animal life and on the planet.

And then Janet pointed out that hope, as a concept, is meaningless without all the difficult experiences that bring hope into sharp relief: suffering, fear, despair, and, yes, outrage.

So yes, maybe Harriet would be quivering with rage if she could see what we were seeing today. Maybe she'd be more

terrifying than ever, more accusing than ever, more righteous than ever, saying, like John the Baptist, “Haven’t you been paying attention? I’ve been telling you something is wrong for is long time!”

And. Maybe, Harriet would have faith, more than any of us, that God can take all these heavy stones in us, and around us, and lift them up and sanctify them and make them live.

Amen.