

Joshua 4:1-9. When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³ and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." ⁴ So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." ⁸ So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. ⁹ Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.

These stones have meaning!

What do these stones mean? The mammoth memorial called Stonehenge has been making researchers and archeologists ask this question for many years. Over the centuries, people have speculated as to its purpose prosing everything from a gigantic solar clock, to an ancient healing center, or ceremonial burial ground. Others have insisted that it is a temple of some kind, but no one can say for sure what it was, who built it, or why. A report came out just a few days ago about more stones that could have been placed around the existing spot, showing that many people are still trying to figure out the meaning behind these mysterious stones. (www.history.com) Stonehenge is certainly an interesting and mysterious display, but for many people who look at this landmark it is nothing more than a pile stones. It may look impressive, but it has no real sure meaning because that meaning has not been passed down to us today.

While Stonehenge may not stir the hearts and minds of some people in this century and in this country with meaning and importance there is a memorial today that has that kind of power. The 9/11 memorial in New York is a powerful sight. Thursday, our nation observed the 13th anniversary of the terrorist attack referred to as 9/11 and many people once again gathered at this site. It seems our nation will never forget the mind-numbing gut-wrenching events of that day. This memorial very much has meaning for the people of this nation in this 21st century. With its 30 foot waterfalls descending down slabs of concrete into reflecting pools, this memorial is thick with meaning. Barrier stones line the monument and the names of those who were killed in this vicious attack serve as both a chilling reminder of terror as well as a tribute to the tremendous heroism that followed; as brave first responders gave their lives in effort to save those who were perishing.

These stones have meaning because we remember those events, and some know those names etched in stone all too well. Those stones have meaning as this history is not only etched in stone markers, but it is etched in our hearts and in our minds, and now in our history books as our children and our children's children will be taught and will not soon forget what happened on the 11th day in September of 2001.

What do these stones mean? This is a question that God wanted his people for multiple generations to ask, and have the answer to, whenever they past by this spot by the river Jordan. He wanted them to remember how he kept his promise to them and carried them into the Promised Land. He had parted the Red Sea for Moses and now after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness as punishment for their disobedience, in his goodness and his faithfulness God had parted the Jordan River for Joshua and his people. He took these waters that were at flood stage and once again he made a path for his people, and the children of Israel once again walked across on dry land. But before they reached the other side, God instructed Joshua to have men from each tribe make a memorial that would be dedicated to this event that marked God's goodness to his people. The people were standing at the crossroads of history for their nation and for God's plan of salvation. They were entering the land that God had promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. There were crossing over from wandering in the wilderness to the promise of life in this land flowing with milk and honey. Twelve stones picked up from the river bed and placed alongside or on top of the others as a reminder of the goodness and power of their God. These stones had meaning!

The laying of memorial stones in those days was common enough practice that people would automatically respond to such a memorial with the appropriate question, "What do these stones mean?" Children were trained to ask that question and often it was the case that this was the site of some great victory, or a place where God had done something wonderful. (What a contrast that is to today, when too often memorials have been springing up because of the horrible things and heinous crimes that sinful human beings have done.) Near the end of his days Joshua would lay another stone under a large tree near the city of Shechem for this is where the covenant between God and his people would be renewed. Later Samuel would lay a stone near a place called Mizpah and he would call the stone Ebenezer, which literally meant, *stone of help*, for here God had thundered with a loud thunder against the Philistines that He threw them into such panic that the Philistines were routed before the Israelites (1 Samuel 7:12). At each place these stones pointed to the power and goodness and the faithfulness of God, therefore, these stones were rich in meaning.

So today, let us, here at St. Matthew's consider the question, "*What do these stones mean?*" A person walking by this building, driving past our property, what do they see? For some people, at least, they see only a building of stone. It's nice and all, they know it is a church, but that is where the meaning stops. To them it might as well just be a bunch of stones. At times is this all we see as well? When we come to this place there is this temptation to become calloused by regularity about what is going on here. We come week after week, sometimes several times a week, and there is this regularity that can breed a certain level of indifference. We drive, we walk, we come in, we sit, we stand and we sit again, and then at the end we greet our fellow church goers before we go out once more. There are times, aren't there, when we pass through these walls, sit between these stones, without really considering what this all means.

Dear friends, don't pass through or even pass by without considering what the Lord has done for you. These stones have meaning. The stone and the wood that make up this building

are a source of great meaning, not simply because your relatives and members of your family worked hard to put them there, but these stones are important because they have meaning that is tied to our rock our Savior Jesus Christ. Surrounded by these stones, this is where we come to worship our Savior and our Lord. This is where we come to celebrate and remember the victory that he has given to us freely. This is where we come to rejoice, and mourn, and be comforted. This is where we come to be strengthened and encouraged. The goodness that he has shown us, the grace that he has poured out on us, the victory that he has promised and given, we remember that all here; these stones have meaning.

This is where the word and sacrament is shared. As we look at that font we remember that this is not just a pile of stones, but this is where you or your child was baptized. This is where God reached out to you and gave you forgiveness, and life, and salvation. This is where a child born into this world dead in sin crossed over from death to life. This is where we were crucified with Christ, where we died to sin and were made alive in him. This is, or a place like this, is where the Spirit of God set us aside to be his own and to be his holy temple. This is where faith began and sins were forgiven and eternal life was promised and sealed with the sign of the cross as this dear little boy or girl was marked as a redeemed child of God.

This baptismal font and this building are more than just a pile of stones, but this is a place where the means of grace is administered, and where we remember the power and the goodness of our God. This is where we pause and reflect on that fact that God would save a sinner like me. Despite my flaws and your mistakes he cleanses us and forgives us. Your personal sins and mine are exposed and his healing gospel is shared as the only salve that could heal us and make us whole. This is where we are fed and strengthened as his word is spoken and explained and applied.

This is also where we sinners once unworthy are made worthy to kneel before his altar and receive the very body and the blood of the Lord Jesus. Forgiveness handed to each one who comes to this altar of stone and it comes from Jesus our Rock and our salvation. Forgiveness poured out individually and peace given to each dear soul. These stones have meaning for us because they lead us to the rock of our salvation Jesus Christ.

Consider what these stones mean to you! Each time you pass by this place, each time you come into this house of prayer and worship, consider what your God has done. Consider his goodness, consider his grace. That's why God had Joshua and his men carry those memorial stones and set them into place. They were to serve as a memorial. Every time someone passed by those stones they would remember the goodness and faithful promises of God. But this was certainly not only to serve as a reminder for those who built the memorial, but it would be a lasting memorial for generations to come. However, that would mean that the story had to be shared; that would mean the meaning behind this memorial had to be told and explained. These stones would have meaning for their children and for their grandchildren because they were instructed on how God parted the waters of the Jordan in order to bring his people into the Promised Land.

How well do we do that? How well do we share with our children and the next generation the rich meaning of what this all means? I fear that we all fall into a similar sinful trap. We bring our children to this place, we encourage the grandkids to come, but then that's about all that we do. We are happy if we get them here and we are satisfied that they have visited, and we are thrilled if they were on their best behavior. But what good is that if we don't take the time to explain the meaning of all of this? What good is it if they pass by or pass through without being

shown how this place and what we do here reminds us of what Jesus has done? What good is it if we rely on one visit a week to this building, or one visit a month, or less, to this place or a place like it without reminding them of the good news of Jesus at home as well? What good is it if we are not receptive to any questions that they might have and just expect that eventually they will catch on by themselves?

Instead, let us take time to learn and then explain the meaning of all of this. Remain in that baptismal grace that God so graciously poured out on you, remember what your God has done, and then come to this place regularly for your own spiritual well-being to learn more about the undeserved love of your God. Children, go ahead and ask your questions, be inquisitive, have a desire to learn more and to explore the mysteries of God and his Word. Parents, especially you fathers willingly take the time to go to scripture or your pastor and do your best to answer those questions your child might have. Parents work with your child through their Sunday school lesson after church, ask what they learned, show an interest in their Catechism work and in so doing show them that this is an important time at an important place, because this is where we gather around to learn about the goodness and the power of our God. As adults let us be inquisitive too, let us learn from those little children and have questions and answer them by going into Scripture so that we may continue to grow in our understanding of God's Word. Let us all do our part to learn and remember and then share what the Lord has done. Because then these stones will continue to have meaning.

We look back gratefully and praise God for those who worked faithfully and diligently to start our church. We thank God for those who loved their Lord and worked "to break up virgin soil", to dedicate and build this house of worship. But let us also continue to pass down their legacy of faith by sharing the message of Jesus, because after all, if we lose that, this place would simply be nothing but a pile of wood and stone. And of course, we know that it is more than that, this is where we come to consider and remember and learn more about the goodness and the power of our gracious God. Because of him, because of our Lord and Savior we have crossed over from death to life, we have been brought into his kingdom and we have given the blessings of forgiveness and peace and the promise of eternal life.

Our Lord Jesus gives us this wonderful assurance that his Church will endure forever. God's people on earth will have and share the good news of Jesus until the end of the earth and into eternity. May God help us and equip us so that we may continue to do our part to faithfully confess the great things that our God has done so that the name of Jesus our Lord and Savior may be praised in this place, and places like it, for generations to come. May this be our lasting legacy: we shared the good news of our faithful God and his undeserved love in Christ Jesus. Amen.