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Sermons In Stones

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Sermons In Stones

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"There was once a man who bought a farm in Scotland. The farm was located in a region of poor soil and severe weather. Scattered all over the fields of oats and barley were stones of various sizes. It appeared as if the stones had been set in their places purposely. The new owner first removed the stones, then seeded and manured his fields. The yield was scanty, so the following year he scattered the stones about the fields again. The yield was adequate. He repeated the experiment, with the same results. He concluded that either the stones acted as a wind-break for the grain, or the stones contributed some fertile element to the soil, or else the sun's genial heat (reflected from the stones) raised the soil temperature a few critical degrees. In all probability, the three acted in concert, and the stony field perversely proved superior to the smooth."

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SERMONS IN STONES

D. Sermons In Stones

By their fruits ye shall know them.

Matt. 7, 20

There was once a man who bought a farm in Scotland. The farm was located in a region of poor soil and severe weather. Scattered all over the fields of oats and barley were stones of various sizes. The farmer sought to remove the stones, but his efforts were all in vain. As he worked, he came to realize that the stones were not just a nuisance, but an integral part of the soil. He learned that the stones were embedded deep in the ground, and that they served as a natural barrier against erosion. As the years passed, the farmer came to appreciate the stones as a vital part of the soil, and he began to work them into his farming practices, using them as natural fertilizers and as a means of improving the soil quality. In this way, the stones became a blessing to him, and he came to see them as a natural gift from nature.

There was once a man who wanted to live a perfect life, free not only of sin, but from temptation as well. So he took a knife, and with a swift surgical movement he relieved his body of its "stones." His wish was granted—and then some. All lust was gone, but so were the benefits that the stones provided. Soon his body became flabby, his hair lost its strength and lustre, his voice piped shrilly when once it had boomed vigorously, and the world no longer took place in the world for a cuckoo, it seems. His work began to suffer, he quarreled with his colleagues, he found fault with his church's doctrine, and he died embittered and rejected.

There was once a religion, some of whose adherents noted too clearly how many stones were strewn in the church's structure. There were bad priests, sales of sacred superstition, levity in the church during the liturgy, casual additions to the liturgy itself, too many saints and angels, and indeed too many gods. The church and the people, they concluded, needed to be purified and made perfect, in conformity with their ideals. So they began to gather up the stones and form neat fascines (which they called logic), and soon the clergy and the people lost their smiles, exchanging their frivolous garments for decent black. The churches were stripped to the bare walls. The liturgy was revised to some prayers not hymns; and an extremely dull and lengthy sermon. The Trinity was purged. Even the Christ who loved sinners was transfigured into a Christ who hated all mankind. Indeed, Christ was no longer Christ, the instrument of God's mercy he was metamorphosed into Satan, the instrument of God's justice. With all the stones removed, the church should have been perfect; and perhaps it was. Outward sin certainly disappeared in this joyous church, and when sin did rear its ugly head, the sinner was punished far more than in the church founded on a stone. The stone had become thoroughly petrified. Freedom became a forgotten word; there was no longer free will, freedom of conscience, free speech, free anything. The totally repressed Saints began to turn uglier and uglier. One day the first innocent old hog was shamed to death by being thrown from a battering ram in a good second round. Suddenly the summer day's tokens of the Sanhedrin were monolithic, and the churches of old were made of stone, firm and unchangeable. The Sanhedrin was suspended, and the skies were blue.

There was once a teacher who was extremely well educated. He was revered by many, in fact, as a great philosopher. One day while philosophizing, he glanced back over the path he had trod in life and saw it had been studded with stones (and a constant uphill climb, at that.) He also began to recall the bruises he'd received, and went astray at the memory. His father had sternly demanded he read and study when his childish body yearned for play. His tutors had beaten him, often mercilessly, and most of his teachers had been harsh and demanding. True, he had become one of the world's best-educated men; but had he been worth it, after all? He began on the instant to devise a system of his own that would remove the stones, and all would be sweetness, light, and freedom of the human spirit. His would, of course, be the perfect system. First he attacked the teachers, since they are the breeding base, the spreading of the seeds that have penetrated his heart. He preserved his nastiest anathemas for the teachers who opposed him (many did at first.) He attacked the entire educational system as outdated and old fashioned, with petrified notions and ideas; as indeed it was. He outlined his plan to other teachers who had not had the same education and others of their school were of the same views and opinions, and they may have stone and some obvious detractors said "basket-weaving." and "Here we go Loopy Lou!" Or course a roaring slogan went along with the system: "We teach the student, not the subject." The educational Jargon was limited and unimaginative, but it suffered, and was very, very contemptible. The system was called "progressive" to contrast it with the old, ossified system. They started with the children, naturally, who were taught only the heretofore minimum, but to bright, cheerful surroundings where the children could do or not, as they pleased. When the elementary grades had been thoroughly liberalized, the secondary schools were de-classified, de-phoneticized, and de-emphasized. Even the parochial schools finally buckled under as more and more of their teachers saw the light in many schools of education. Finally, the colleges and universities gave in, and in no time at all (the students, unable to keep up with the pace of their studies, rounded the campuses at will), expanding their minds as they rounded. Success was so complete, in fact, that even the shortest-eyed observer couldn't tell a student from a non-student. And of course everyone from K through 16 was very, very happy. Oh, there are still a few stray stones left. Indeed, a slight hill overs the view from time to time, but eventually all the valleys will be filled and all the roads made smooth, and all will be universal happiness and dulness.

There was once a thriving civilization that began to chafe under the restrictions imposed by prosperity. The laws were much too harsh: criminals, for example, were being imprisoned; murderers were being eliminated, burglars were, on the contrary made exempt; and people were so fearful of being caught that they were extremely difficult to make a dishonest living; things like that. Little by little, reforms changed all that. Soon things were suitably rearranged: criminals were tearfully blessed and told to go sin some more; ill-advised good Samaritans who went to the aid of their neighbors being attacked openly in the streets were arrested, prosecuted, and hung; and thefts were fully protected in the law courts, and their victims were deprived of the fruits of their honest toil [the law, for a fee, even collected for the cheats]; lawyers knew no law, but had all the loopholes memorized, and could punch one out at will, things like that. Tax collectors were empowered to harass and bully taxpayers and strip them of everything. Tenants were given triumphal processions, patriotism became an obscene word; enclosures held their hands high and even formed unions; the country's enemies were never so big and so grandly prosecutioned to kill a soldier; women's rights were like that. Education was all but eliminated though the forms were, piously retained; honest labor was demanded; children were neither supervised nor corrected; honesty became a vice; things like that. The pursuit of immortality had failed, and severe pleasures were sought with violence, hate, cruelty, rage; male coupled with male, female with female—and why not males dressed and acted like females, women dressed and acted like men; where once one could find rugged warriors and athletes, there were few nearly discontented, heavily scented boys; sterilizing made people droll; gangs of children and young adults roamed the countryside to beat and gouge and steal and terrify; things like that! Protest became fashionable; riots were running, burning and looting was the normal order of the day; there was hatred; things like that. People were no longer content with leisurely days, no more content with leisurely days, no more content with the immortality of their ancestors; they hankered for eternal life, and a little sudden unification; strangers were the envy of the world's millions, and people appeared on the scene, each with a stone in grasped in each other hand: "like a stone-age savage armed," and the civilization perished. One thinks of Jane Austin who looked stonily at her own offspring, contemptuous times and summed up the Regency Period: "No stones," said she—or something to that effect.

Stones have many virtues, and are the most magical single element on earth. In a sense, then, they are in our midst. And the stones of life are the faults and hardships we suffer as we progress through that life. The stones bruise us, true, but they radiate a gradual warmth as well; and the colder life threatens to be, the more necessary their warmth. Like a man's own "stones," their presence exerts a reassuring (rather than an extreme) pressure, reminding us that we are still vital and potent and whole. When the stones are gone, all is smoothness and coldness and sterility. When life becomes smooth, cold, and sterile, then it is truly absurd. We absolutely require a few faults to balance our fatal urge to perfection.

The ultimate in irony, however, is a certain cathedral that has taken forever to build, may never be completed, and is intended to last forever. It is constructed almost entirely of stone, and embedded in the walls are stones from every corner of the globe. In this case, there are altogether too many stones: the builders sought them, and they are all in place exactly as intended. There is a lack of warmth, a chill in that pile. There hasn't been a scandal in that cathedral since the first stone was put in place, and there it stands: fashionable, cold, and empty. So very, very empty.