

“Piling Stones”

Genesis 28:10-22

Richard C. Allen

South Glastonbury

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When I was a boy attending church school here at South Church, my favorite hymn to sing was “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” I’m sure I had no idea what the song is about, but I was intrigued by the idea of climbing a ladder! I still am!

It turns out Jacob saw the ladder in dream as he slept in a dense forest. Using a stone for a pillow, he dreamed he saw angels climbing up and down a ladder that reached to heaven. The angels had a message for him from God. When he awoke in the morning, he understood that he had had a God encounter. His first impulse was to pile stones to mark the spot where God has sought him out and gained his attention.

Thereafter, anyone walking along that path would see the piled stones and know it was a sacred place.

In my imagination, I picture Jacob returning to that same forest with his children to show them the place where his life took on new meaning, where God had blessed him. In my wildest imagination, I could go to that forest now and the stone cairn would still be there, testifying to God’s real presence.

I’ve been thinking about what the landscape would look like if we were to resurrect Jacob’s ancient custom of piling stones. I am guessing we’d see stone cairns in every direction.

Last summer, I was sitting on the bench on the church lawn when I saw a car turn into the driveway. Two young adults jumped out of that car and came running over to show me the engagement ring he had just slipped onto her finger. They described the exact location where he popped the question. It was also the location of their first date. As they departed, I wondered if they had piled stones under that huge tree on Tryon Street where God's love embraced them. That would be so appropriate. Jacob would smile. Do you remember where you were when it dawned on you that you were in love? That would be a place for piling stones.

A few weeks ago, one of our middle school youth and his dad participated in our Youth-in-Mission Pay It Forward scheme. They took their \$20 bill and bought bottled water and a mountain of donuts. They then drove the streets of Hartford in search of homeless people. Each time they presented water and a donut to a woman or a man, they heard the words, "God bless you." This simple interaction was so meaningful, they have decided to do it again this summer. Come September, there may be little piles of stones on street corners where this father-son team had unexpected God encounters.

A lot of people ask me, "how does one know when it's been a God encounter?" Jacob's dream was a God encounter, but is that true about every dream? Jacob was all alone in the forest. Is it always that way? What my life experience suggests is that God encounters are often accompanied by tears. This is why I urge everyone to not be ashamed of their tears, to not block their tears, but to let the tears flow freely. Never leave home without a hanky, just in case! Because our tears arise from our souls.

Our tears tell us we are, indeed, alive. Our tears are a sign that God is here, right here, not up on a far off cloud, but right here, in this moment, on this ladder, under this tree, on this street corner. I know that tears are often viewed as a sign of weakness. I would argue the opposite. Tears are a sign of our spiritual nature.

In the game of Trivial Pursuit, there is a question asking for the shortest verse in the Bible. Everyone knows that one. It's the two word verse, "Jesus wept." The thing is: it's not trivial. Jesus wept at the news that his friend, Lazarus, had died. It was a powerful God encounter moment. I don't know if he piled stones there, but he might have!

As I reflect on places where I may have piled stones, they tend to be places where a reconciliation occurred. When I pray, I often refer to God's reconciling love. For me, it's in those awesome moments of reconciliation where God is most obviously present. A few years ago, anticipating a significant high school reunion, I called to mind an incident when words I had spoken so long ago had fractured a relationship with a prep school dormmate. Words spoken casually did a lot of damage. I did a Google search for my classmate and discovered he is a practicing physician, a healer, in southern New Hampshire. I wrote to him right away. He wrote back. We recalled the wounding. Words of forgiveness were spoken. At the reunion, there was a reconciling hug that I will never forget. As I worked on this sermon a few days ago, I knew I would drive up to Easthampton, Massachusetts and pile a few stones outside of Memorial Dormitory as a sign that God had been in that place, a sacred place of reconciling love.

I would love to know where you have piled stones or where you might now go and pile stones. I imagine John Lewis may have piled some stones on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Rosa Parks may have piled some stones at a bus stop in Montgomery. Where have you piled stones? Would you tell me? For it is when we locate those sacred places and pile a few stones that we know we are living in the greatest of hope. Amen.