

**The Stone the Builder Refused**  
**Accotink UU Church – March 13, 2016**  
**Revs Scott and Anya Sammler-Michael**

**READING - PSALM 118**

Today's service takes its name from Psalm 118. This is a psalm of deliverance – this one a song of thanks for victory in battle. In the theology of Ancient Israel, social justice won the favor of the almighty so as to sustain the nation. It speaks to Israel's precarious, vulnerable situation at the crossroads of the travel routes between Asia, Europe and Africa; situated thusly Israel was often attacked or threatened. Sound familiar?

The psalmist writes,

*“[God], I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.*

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

*This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

*..... let us rejoice and be glad in it.”*

**SERMON I Rev Anya**

Sometimes the stories that others share about us, show us in a brighter light, a more righteous light, than we might choose to show ourselves.

The story tellers are the ones that love us, that see in us something of worth and meaning - that hold us with grace, unconditional, just like the love that the Universe, that the holy shines on us.

My mother is the teller of these stories for me. Rev. Scott has learned to tune out when it's "Anya story hour" in the Sammler house. I *am* an only child. My mother spins tales of my father and her mother, but I am the usual suspect... and the stories can go on for quite some time. These stories are all part true, and part love... which has its own kind of truth.

There's one she tells of our stone wall - a New England stone wall, that sweeps the side of our driveway. The stones are held together by weight and traction, nothing more. My mother was weeding around the wall one morning. I was a child. A stone slipped and her hand was pinned. Her other hand alone, could not move the stone. She called for me. I heard, and as the story goes, I arrived and acted deliberately, releasing for the time, my child's mind, so I could lift the stone.

I only remember this story in my mother's voice. I think I have an image or two of the day - but who's to say. It has been preserved *for* me, not *by* me. It is a story of the way we can act at times, in the interest of others, without pause or deliberation - simply because it is necessary and good - simply because we have been called.

I am glad to have this story of me, because being human... and no matter what my mother believes, I am *quite* human... I struggle to grasp every stone that I should grasp. I pause, I deliberate, and at times I turn away from the metaphorical stones, that need my attention, my vigilance... the stones, that might just be the cornerstones, the strength, the

stability, the grace, to bind me to that, which I and others need.

The other evening I was walking home alone, past dusk, from a restaurant in our town. There are a few houseless citizens that make a home of our neighborhood, but I was surprised to pass this one man, resting on the steps of an apartment complex. At first I just nodded good evening, but the air was brisk, and a few steps past, a conviction moved in me, and I turned. “Sir, do you have any where warm to go tonight?” “Oh yes, thank you, he said.” And as an afterthought, with warmth, he added, “Thank you, thank you for caring.”

Two things broke in my soul -

The first: the blessing of connection, a real moment of connection... a blessing made far brighter in contrast to the number of times I have walked past others, full of fear, deliberating - “what should I say?” Afraid to make the good will gesture. Afraid to lift the stone. Amen?

And the second thought that broke in my soul: “What the heck would I have done if he had said ‘no.’?”

The stones that the builders, and you and I are builders, reject, refuse - those stones, those opportunities - that might break our souls open with connection, are not without complexity, not without danger, not without struggle. To choose them, we must choose to step into that struggle of not knowing, because, simply because, we are called.

## **II Rev Scott**

Let me share a story from the Hebrew Scriptures, a tale of one rejected, the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. Joseph was a life-preserver. Joseph was Jacob’s most beloved son, born of Rachel. Joseph had ten older brothers and one younger brother, Benjamin. The elder brothers knew their father favored Joseph – what happens when siblings know one child is favored over the others? ~ Jealousy ... And Joseph was a dreamer, possessing a divine gift to interpret dreams. Jacob made Joseph a robe with long sleeves just for his son Joseph; it became known as his Dream Coat. And Joseph, who seems to be not only without guile, but a little naïve about his brothers’ jealousy – Joseph tells his brothers of his dreams – like the dream where eleven stars all bow down to Joseph; many of Joseph’s dreams seemed to involve his eleven brothers ‘bowing down to him.’

Then one day the elder brothers are tending Jacob’s flocks, they see Joseph, seventeen, traipsing around in his dream coat, ‘checking up on them,’ as his father requested, and Joseph’s brothers snap, conspiring to kill their father’s favorite; throwing him into a pit without food or water. But fearing the wrath of God and their father, they opt not to shed his blood, but instead sell him into slavery. They dip his dream coat in goat’s blood to convince Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Father Jacob is crestfallen, weeping, tearing his clothes ~ inconsolable.

As a slave Joseph ends up in Egypt where he is framed by a jealous woman and ends up in prison. In Prison Joseph has as a cellmate - a man who upon his release becomes Pharaoh's cupbearer. Pharaoh has curious dreams that vex him, night after night – seven fat cows, and then seven emaciated ones. What did this all mean? Seeing Pharaoh vexed and perplexed, the cupbearer tells Pharaoh of his old cellmate, the Hebrew named Joseph, a grand interpreter of dreams. Pharaoh calls for Joseph, explains his dream, and Joseph interprets, “There will be seven years of abundance, followed by seven years of famine.” And Pharaoh, convinced of the divine origin of Joseph's interpretation, not only heeds Joseph's message, but frees Joseph and puts him in charge of all Egypt's provisions and storage. “Since God has shown you the future,” Pharaoh says, “you will be in charge of it all, and only I will be greater than you in all the land.”

The time of plenty comes, and they store their bounty; the time of famine comes, right on schedule, and the people survive because of Joseph's preparation. During the time of famine Joseph's brothers come to Egypt: they heard that Egypt had food for sale. Now Joseph's brothers all think he is long dead; yet it is Joseph from whom they must buy food. Joseph recognizes his brothers as soon as they enter. Joseph speaks through an interpreter, testing them. His brothers think he cannot understand their speech; as they wait, unsure they'll get what they need, Joseph hears them claim to one another they are being punished with hunger for selling Joseph into slavery; hearing this Joseph weeps, and he lets go of his anger at being sold into slavery by his brothers.

He understands his fate was part of something much larger than human ambition, revenge or desire. He sees his exile, imprisonment, and installation as leader of the Egyptian economy as divinely ordained. Then, overcome with brotherly affection, Joseph releases his Egyptian guards – so they will not see their chief lose control of his emotions – and he reveals himself to his brothers as the one they sold into slavery 20 years prior – “It is I, your brother Joseph.” The divine led me here so I could grant you enough land to thrive – please, move our whole family to Egypt, live under my protection.” Joseph and his brothers “weep on one another's necks” and feast.

Joseph's plan works; Egypt and many of its neighbors survive the famine. Joseph doesn't just save a life or only his life – he saves millions as a public servant. Like so many tales in the Hebrew scriptures, we see that religious integrity requires the re-ordering of society into a more just and equitable whole. As the giver of justice for Pharaoh, Joseph says, “I do this for you so that you will not have to live in poverty.” Here is the justice message - the state's obligation, according to Joseph's story, is to prevent poverty, to look out for the poor, the widow and the orphan, to be kind to the immigrant because we were all once aliens in the land of Egypt – we have all been strangers, exiled to strange lands or unrecognizable situations ~ we have all been rejected.

As Joseph shows, the stone which the builders rejected can indeed become the cornerstone of an empire of truth and justice. To Egypt he came as a guide from beyond to lead Egypt and the nearby world to safety and prosperity. We have the power to be such a delight to the world

### III Rev Anya

"This being human is a guest house/ Every morning a new arrival," says the poet Rumi. "A joy, a depression, a meanness," he continues, "some momentary awareness comes As an unexpected visitor." (Like a Joseph in his dream coat, that we don't know what to do with... yet.)

"Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in."

These are some of the stones we refuse - the stones of sorrow, shame, malice.  
Not all the stones meet us on the outside, some come from within.  
"Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in," says our poet. Perhaps they too are  
the head corner stones - with mortar enough to fill the broken places within.

You are expected to be strong, right?  
When you leave your home for your office - you need to show up, ready to get to work -  
to get things done. When you care for your families, they need you to be the sturdy one -  
the parent, the grandparent that is consistent in compassion, right? When you engage at  
social events, you can't show up sad or angry - who will want to talk to the angry young  
man or the sad sac? When then, when can you meet the sorrow, shame, the aches - these  
guests, that are part of our being, and let them in?

When I grow weary, when the darkness of these days, riddled with violence and fear,  
riddled with the shooting of innocents, with the madness of anger... when my own  
expectations weigh on me - sorrow settles in...  
And my first response is to turn away, refuse it.  
If I ignore it, maybe it will go away. *Hide and seek* - the *post*-adolescent version!  
If I let my mind grow numb with an inane movie or face-book chatter, maybe the ache  
will subside. Right? But then I wake in the night and ... *ollie ollie oxen-free*... ready or  
not, here I come! says the sadness... And now it is monstrous and looming.  
Right... you've been there?

We learn, again and again, in our social life, our work life, even our family life, that we  
need to be strong - to defend ourselves against these guests, these aching guests.

But we were never meant to be perfect, nor impermeable. When life was carved from  
carbon and nitrogen, complexity was born. Without diversity, life is impossible. Without  
hate, we would not understand the power of love. Without shame, we could not taste the  
blessing of honor or esteem. Without sorrow, we couldn't understand the power of joy.  
This is not defeatist philosophy, it is complexity theory!

When I wake in the night and the sorrow is looming, the first task is to call it “mine.” When my father’s father died, he cried - the tears spilled like ancient cisterns overflowing. He showed me that vulnerability was strength... because vulnerability was love, broken open, invited in. His, Mine. This is paradox, and paradox serves us.

Only when we meet our ache, face to face, when we thank it, literally thank it for its presence, can it teach us the truth of who we are... that we contain more love than we thought imaginable. That our hearts are wide and deep, vulnerable, and vast, and inherently connected... interconnected, bound. The stones that we thought the world was throwing at us - they become the head corner stones, our strength, our wisdom.

#### **IV Rev Scott**

Vulnerability with humility is indeed strength. Often we have no idea of our true beauty until we commit ourselves to something of beauty and justice. Can we consider rejection as an opportunity to find purpose anew? Joseph wasn’t really needed as an 11th brother, to watch his other brothers tend the flocks. He was born to save the people of his world – not just his people, but Egypt and the whole region had food during the famine. “All people are my people,” Joseph’s actions say. We too must say this, “I am here so none will come into poverty.”

Joseph was able to live into his destiny when, like our story today, he let go of anger and revenge and, he bound himself, to a purpose much larger and transcendent than his own will and desire – using his gifts to serve the world; only then could his life sing. Let me tell you about a time when rejection led me to discover my life’s calling. The sorrows that visited me made me think that love was no longer imaginable. I had lost a significant relationship. I was about to lose my house in Baltimore. All I could think to do was curl up, shut the door, not call any of my friends and to fixate on ‘why was I so foolish to let this happen to me?’ I chased away those pains that are truly catalysts for transformation. So I packed up my old home, my old life. And when I got to my new house and began setting up my office, I opened a box labeled, “Recent Office Books.” Unpacking these books, which had the books I was reading as my life was crumbling around me, I noticed a pattern. All 20 or so of those books were about spirituality and the history of religion.

At the time I was not a religious person, or so I thought. When I was a teenager I became convinced that religion was one of the world’s ill, not a gift. It was 1978, the rise of the so-called Moral Majority, and I thought to be religious was to give error permission to misrule our society. I didn’t know that there were people such as you. I didn’t know that there was something into which I could pour myself, through which I could find healing, I didn’t know that if I followed where that pain led me – to the bookstore, to inwardness – that I would discover what was missing from my life. My own reading list showed me what I was missing. I found my way to The Unitarian Universalist Church, to a mentor, Reverend Lisa Ward. Lisa ‘kicked me out of the nest’ towards seminary – and all my life suddenly made sense – a larger plan into which my longings, pain and gifts coalesced into depth and meaning. This was my life-preserver – what I had rejected – being a

religious person – is what ended up saving me. It wasn't until I let go of my resistance to religious life that I found a life-saving faith that honored all of my humanity and challenged me to bring as much of it as possible into every moment of living.

That UU church north-east of Baltimore the very laboratory of my becoming; a community of caring, intelligent people bound by covenant to support each other, to challenge one another into our promise, to hold before us our dreams of truth and justice honored and upheld. It was in that place where what made my heart sing and my soul safe was a place to let go of the pain of my divorce and see new possibilities for love and connection, a place to serve – we are all ministers; the word means “to serve.”

This place, where we see one another in each others eyes, we know our strength because of our own struggle, to celebrate what Joseph cries, “All people are my people.” A place where our natural response is gratitude. Where we cry, “None shall live in poverty,” whether that is poverty of spirit or poverty of resources.

This is what I mean when I claim that Unitarian Universalism saved my life. If it wasn't for this great faith we share I wouldn't have found my path, wouldn't have organized my life around deep values of service and care – I wouldn't even know Anya. I wasn't free to sing my true song until I bound myself to the religious life ~ the right community, the right container, the mother ship for our inner and outer transformation, the Unitarian Universalist Faith we serve – that I was able to start living into the promise of my destiny. I would not have able to learn so much about how devoted people like you can change the world when your passions play out in service to the world's greatest needs – saving lives and ways of life, promoting love.

Together we build the world we dream of. All people are my people  
The powerful exist so that none shall live in poverty. What we do is a matter of life and death, and this finding our true larger purpose is our salvation.  
This is why we serve and support this congregation and Unitarian Universalism.  
Find the stone you rejected that will form the cornerstone of your enlightened transformation.

## **BENEDICTION -**

What stone that you rejected might be come *your* cornerstone?  
To what must we bind ourselves so our passions thrive by serving the world's needs, so no one needs live in fear or hunger? Together we build the world we dream of.  
All people are my people. The powerful exist so that none shall live in poverty  
What we do here is a matter of life and death; finding our true mission is our salvation.