

STONES THAT REMEMBER FIRE

A Sermon for Confirmation Sunday

John 14:1–14 | Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60 | 1 Peter 2:2–10

I. THE BLUEPRINT — *What the Father Has Always Been Building*

On the evening of April 15, 2019, the world watched Notre-Dame de Paris burn.

Eight hundred and fifty-six years of oak, stone, lead, and prayer collapsed in orange light as the great medieval spire cracked, leaned, and fell through the cathedral's roof into the nave below. Millions watched on live television. People who could not have told you a single thing about Christian theology stood on the banks of the Seine and wept, because something felt like it was being lost that could never be recovered.

But one image circulated that night that stopped people cold: through the smoke and the falling ash, through the haze of ruin — the golden altar cross still stood. Perfectly upright. Undisturbed. Surrounded by smoldering rubble. Glowing.

Hold that image. We are going to need it.

"Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus says in John 14. *"Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you."*

The Father has always been a builder. From the garden to the tabernacle, from the temple to the Incarnation itself — God has been constructing a dwelling where his glory and his children share the same address forever. He drew the blueprint. And what does it require? Love God completely — heart, mind, soul, every ounce of strength. And love the person next to you as fiercely as you love yourself. Acts 6 shows us what that looks like in flesh and blood: deacons appointed so that not one vulnerable person slips through the cracks. In 1 Peter 2, we are called *living stones*, each one shaped and fitted and load-bearing, built together into a spiritual house from which the praises of God resound into a watching world.

This is the Father's blueprint. It is breathtaking. It is good. And this young confirmand who will stand before us today — and the many others making this same declaration across the church this Spring, — has looked at that blueprint and said publicly: *"Yes. This is what I was made for."*

II. THE FIRE — *What We Have Done to What Was Given to Us*

Now we need to talk about the fire.

Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 and said something that landed like a hammer: "*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.*" They covered their ears, dragged him outside the city, and crushed him to death beneath a hail of stones. Stephen was not only speaking to Jerusalem. He was speaking to us.

You have loved yourself first. You scroll past the struggling neighbor while feeding an algorithm calibrated entirely to your appetite. You have worshipped the metrics of your own life — the grade, the approval rating, the follower count — more faithfully than the God who called you by name in the waters of your baptism. You have been stiff-necked in your relationships, indifferent to the lonely, spiritually deaf when the Holy Spirit was whispering something that would have cost you comfort.

To our young disciple being confirmed today: We love you. Which is precisely why I cannot be dishonest with you. You have already begun setting fires. We all have. Confirmation does not begin a sinless life. It begins an honest one.

Here is what investigators determined about Notre-Dame: the fire began in the restoration scaffolding. The cathedral was being *repaired* when it caught fire. Isn't that uncomfortably familiar? Some of our most devastating sins occur in the very moments we thought we were finally getting better.

III. THE CROSS IN THE ASHES — *The One Thing That Did Not Fall*

And yet. *The cross still stood.*

"*I am the way, and the truth, and the life,*" Jesus says. Not a way. *The way.* One cross, still standing, in the middle of the ruin.

Philip says, "*Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.*" Jesus answers: "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*" The God who designed the blueprint did not wait safely at a distance. He entered the burning building himself. He let the whole weight of the collapsing structure — every selfish calculation, every act of stiff-necked resistance, every fire we ever set — fall on him at Calvary. He absorbed it all. The Resurrection is God's declaration that the cross held. Death pulled with everything it had, and the cross did not move.

This is why absolution is not a religious formality. When the pastor speaks — *I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit* — heaven is ratifying what the cross accomplished for you, personally. When you receive Christ's true body and blood at this altar, you are not commemorating a distant event. You are being placed in contact with the living stone that the builders rejected and that God made the cornerstone. The smoke clears. The rubble is removed. *You are forgiven. Completely. Today.*

IV. THE LIVING STONES — *What Gets Built Now*

Here is what restoration scientists discovered after the Notre-Dame fire, and it is more sobering than anyone initially reported.

The fire did not strengthen the ancient limestone. It destroyed it. Temperatures reached 800 to 900 degrees Celsius — hot enough to trigger *calcination*, where limestone chemically breaks down into quicklime and carbon dioxide. Micro-cracks spread through the surviving blocks. When firefighters drenched the cathedral, some stones absorbed so much water their weight increased by a third. Stone that had held Gothic arches for eight centuries was quietly dissolving toward dust.

The decision was clear: these stones could not be saved by better mortar. They had to be *replaced*. Crews identified every heat-damaged block — turned red or black from oxidation — and set them aside. Then they went to the quarries of the Île-de-France, the same geological formations the original medieval builders had used, and brought up *fresh limestone*. Unburned. Structurally sound. And the fire had given researchers one unexpected gift: *access*. Exposed masonry revealed the original medieval mortar formula — long lost — which they recreated. The new stones were set with mortar more faithful to the original design than any repair in the cathedral's modern history.

Fresh stone. Original mortar. Ancient design. Rebuilt.

This is the gospel. God did not look at you — burned through by sin, cracked, growing heavy with failure — and decide to patch you with better mortar. He replaced what could not be saved. *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* You are not a repaired version of your former self. You are *freshly quarried*. Set into the wall of God's house with the ancient mortar of Word and Sacrament, absolution and communion, that the Master Builder himself specified.

And repentance works exactly like that fire-given access: when we stop concealing the damage and come honestly into the light, the Spirit doesn't recoil. He studies the original

design and applies what is needed — not our self-improvement, but the mortar of grace, Christ's own righteousness pressed into the joints of our weakness.

To Julia, being confirmed today — and to every young person standing at this threshold this season — you are being placed. Not because you are undamaged. But because the Master Builder has chosen fresh stone from the quarry of your baptism, where you were cut clean and marked with the cross, and he is setting you now into the wall of his spiritual house alongside every stone placed before you and every stone being placed this very week. You do not stand alone in this wall.

Go and love the overlooked person. Confess when you fail and return to this altar. Live the blueprint — not to earn your place, but because you are already in it, and the stones around you are depending on your weight. When you do, the Spirit is not quenched. He is given room to continue the restoration until the house is complete and the Father's glory fills every room.

You are, as Peter says, *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession — that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

Let not your hearts be troubled. The Father's house has many rooms, and there is one prepared with your name on it. The cross still stands in the middle of everything that has burned. And you — fresh stone, quarried by grace, set by the hand of God himself — are being built into something that will never fall.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.