

Hopefully you all picked up a stone on the way in. I told one of my friends that I was going to give everyone a rock on their way in to church today and he questioned whether it was a good idea to arm the congregation before giving a homily. I guess we'll find out.

The message of today's readings is pretty obvious: If we think we're justified in condemning anyone, we need to take a long, honest look at ourselves first. It should then be blindingly obvious that we ought to be totally out of the business of throwing stones.

On the face of it then, there seems to be nothing particularly holy about the stones we're holding. You may be right, but then again you never know. These stones might actually turn out to be a lot holier than you think. Let's see how that might be.

Take a look at your rock. Notice that it's pretty hard. You might even have a dirty one, or one with pointy edges on it. Chances are you wouldn't want to have the rock in your hand fired at you out of a slingshot. John had a pretty good idea when he used stones to symbolize the hurtful judgments we feel justified hurling at one another from time to time. It's such an easy thing to do, isn't it, even though we don't like being hit ourselves.

Think of your stone now as a grudge, resentment or some other negative judgment like that. Not only wouldn't we want to be someone's target, chances are we wouldn't want other people to notice that we've got a stone in our hands ourselves. What should we do?

Let's see now: we could hide the stone. We could pretend it's someone else's stone we're just carrying for them, deny that we're really carrying a stone, or we could simply get rid of the stone.

Suppose we decided to hide our stone. We could put it in our pocket and carry it around for a while, if we wanted to. Let's do that now. Please put your stone in your pocket or

someplace else on your body. A purse or your baby's car seat won't do, the hiding place has to be on you someplace.

Don't try to give your stone away to the person next to you either – your stone is your stone, just like our grudges and resentments are our issues and no one else's. If you haven't got a pocket, you'll just have to clench your fist and carry it around in your hand, not unlike the way some folks display their harsh judgments of others.

Carrying a grudge inside ourselves is similar to what we just did with our stone. No matter where we store our stones, we always know they're there. If we happen to sit on them, it's going to feel pretty uncomfortable. The judgments of others that we hold inside are like that too. The pain they cause us can range from mild discomfort every now and then all the way up to total disablement.

I think you'd agree after carrying your stone around with you for a while that you really need to deal with it. Recall that the gospel doesn't say that any stones were dropped – folks simply went away, carrying their stones, perhaps to await some opportunity when Jesus wasn't around to mess up their plans. To drop a stone is to admit that we had no business ever holding one, and it's hard to do. Likewise, dropping our negative judgments is also hard to do, but it can be done. Let me give you a way you might consider.

Step one is to admit that you really do have a stone. Look at your stone right now and ask yourself how unreasonable it would be to declare that you don't have a stone when you know you've really got one. Same goes for the stones we carry in our hearts.

Next we have to decide we want to get rid of the stone. Anyone who has ever had a pebble in his or her shoe knows it doesn't take much convincing to get us to decide that it

has to go. But sometimes it's not as easy to decide to get rid of the stones in our hearts. It might even seem unjust, impossible or even wrong, especially if we've been injured somehow, or if pride or some form of self-righteousness happens to be in the mix.

The good news is that God will happily remove our stones if we drop them into God's hands and allow God to take them away. The real first step in getting rid of our interior stones is to admit that not only do we have them, but also that we're powerless to get rid of them all by ourselves. We do have a crucial part to play, for sure, but the ultimate transformation requires the power of God to complete.

I mentioned at the outset that it's perfectly possible for that stone in your hand to become something quite holy. Here's how: take your stone home with you and put it someplace where you can't miss seeing it. Tape it to your iPhone, or put it on your dashboard; carry it in your pocket or leave it on your desk. Grab some more on your way out and give them to your friends and family. Let your rock remind you of the hard and sharp edges in your own heart whenever you're tempted to criticize, lash out or nurse a grudge. Let it remind you how good it is to choose compassion instead. The great law of Love is, after all, both a commandment and a gift.

Finally, take your stone with you to the sacrament of reconciliation and say what you need to say. After you receive absolution, receive the Eucharist with a clean heart and then keep your stone close at hand as a reminder – this time - of God's rock-solid love. That's how to make your stone, and yourself, perfectly holy.