

WHITE STONE CEREMONY

Rev. Richard Maraj

Sunday, Jan. 5, 2025

You know, I woke up laughing this morning. Yeah. I must have slept funny. [Congregants groan and laugh]

So I know this guy who's trying to breed racing deer, but a lot of people are accusing him of trying to make a fast buck. [Congregants laugh and groan; drummer does a "rim shot."]

You know, they say that age 60 -- that 60 is a new 40. Well, if 60 is a new 40, that means 9 p.m. is the new midnight. [Congregants groan and laugh]

How many people made New Year's resolutions this year? How many people really don't believe in resolutions, but have goals and visions and intentions for your life?

You know, at the beginning of the year, resolutions are not ... There is always this inherent excitement and joyfulness and hopefulness around getting a fresh start and having a new beginning, you know? And so, to me, whether it is resolutions or goals or intentions or visions, it all tells us one very important thing: and that is that we all desire to have a better life. That every one of us is wanting to see something improve, something change, something get better, and then move on to something greater.

So my question for you is: What area of your life would you like to improve? What would you like to get better? You know, in what way would you like to be happier? In what way would you like to experience more love, or greater health and prosperity?

What I'd like to improve is telling better jokes. [Congregants laugh and applaud] Okay; I can feel the love; I still feel the love. [Congregants laugh]

But the thing is: it's clear. We all have desires. We have a desire for things to get better in our lives.

You know, in the Talmud it says this: *"Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, 'Grow! Grow!'"* And the fact is there is a Spirit in us that is saying, *"Grow! Grow."* That we are here to evolve; that we are here to expand; that we are here to unfold in the fullest of the spiritual being that we came here to be.

And God has given us some incredible spiritual powers to develop, unfold, and transform ourselves. Some incredible resources! It tells us in Scripture -- so many of them -- "Ask." "Seek." "Knock." "Decide." We are told about the power of our mind -- *"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."* The power of the spoken word; the power of our imagination; the power of our vision; the power of taking action; the power of belief; the power of faith. We have *so many* incredible spiritual powers and attributes and resources. It is amazing that sometimes we don't fulfill our goals, that we aren't feeling as happy and fulfilled in our lives.

And I think there is one spiritual attribute that gets so underutilized, even though it is so powerful. And I believe can help us in so many areas of our lives. And the attribute I want to talk about this morning that will help us have a better life it is the ability to listen. It is a powerful and incredible ability that we have that we so underutilized.

Jesus even knew it when he referred to it; the words he said: *"We have ears, but do not hear."*

You know, listening is a powerful important thing. And it causes us a lot of pain when we don't listen. That we have misunderstandings and hurt feelings because we didn't listen. It causes us pain, problems, disconnect and missed opportunities by not listening.

You know, I would say the number one complaint that is so common in relationships: *"He just doesn't listen."* *"She doesn't listen."* *"Our children just don't listen."* And our children are saying, *"Oh, my parents just don't listen."* *"The boss just doesn't listen."*

You know, I bet every single one of us knows that we could probably do a better job in listening. Paul Tillich, the 1930s and '40s theologian, said an interesting line. He said, *"The first law of love is to listen."* The first law of love is to listen.

So let me read you the first two greatest commandments using the word love ... and then listen. The first greatest commandment is to love the Lord thy God with all your heart; with all your mind; and all your soul and strength. And the second is to love others as we love ourselves.

But if we flip that and use the word "listen," it would still be as powerful ... maybe even more powerful. The greatest commandment would be to listen to the Lord thy God with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your soul and strength. And to listen to others as we listen to ourselves.

And so, my question for you is: How well do you listen to yourself? How many people know you can do a little better job in maybe listening to yourself and tuning in to yourself? How well do you listen to others? And I know we'd all raise our hands that we could do a better job listening to others. I won't even ask.

And then the other one is, how well do you listen to God? How often you to allow yourself to be still and truly listen to God with an open heart? And I bet every one of us could do that and spend more time listening to God.

I read an interview and saw an interview with Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon. And it started in 1994, and he wanted to be the biggest online bookstore, and things just kept growing and growing. And he kept taking risks; he kept taking chances. He had investors say he had a 70% chance of failing. And so, he had a hard time getting some investments early. His parents gave him \$300,000, but he kept growing and growing. He grew from books to music to consumer goods, videos, web services. It kept growing and growing and growing to the point, today, it's \$234 billion dollars ... is what he is worth.

So, anybody know the original name of Amazon? Cadabra! And he changed it to Amazon for two reasons: one the largest river in the world, the Amazon. And then the other one is Amazon begins with "A," so apparently you get more hits or people find you easier alphabetically.

But here's what he said in his interview. He said, *"The best decisions and the most successful actions I've taken came from listening to my intuition, trusting my gut, accessing a wisdom and inner intelligence within."* He said that logic and analysis and experts and economists are good, but *his* success, he says, has mainly come through listening to himself. Listening to his gut and trusting it.

You know, the White Stone Ceremony is based on listening to the still, small voice of God. Listening with an awareness that there is an Intelligence; that there is a wisdom and a knowing in us that can lead our lives to greater possibilities, greater joy, greater peace ... if we will just listen. Practice this incredible skill of listening.

And so David Williamson, a Unity minister, created this White Stone Ceremony. He created it based on Revelation 2:17. I'll read it to you and then we'll kind of analyze and walk through it together. It says:

"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna, And I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

And so, let's just kind of analyze that. Notice the first two lines begin with, "Let anyone" and "To everyone." To let anyone who has an ear and to everyone who overcomes ...

And what it is saying very clearly is that every one of us is connected to God. We are connected to the Source. That nobody is left out; that to any and everyone, God is available and accessible to all. That that Presence and Spirit of God is something that we are all connected to. That God is within us all. No one is left out. That we are all God's children, and we all have this Spirit and Power within us.

And so, to let "anyone" and "everyone" means everyone's included ... but it means that we still have some work to do. That might be true, but we have some things to do. And it says "to anyone who listens ..." Anyone who listens to the Spirit. To anyone who is willing to stop and just be still. To stop and be present. To stop and pay attention. To listen to the still, small voice of God. To turn within to that Spirit. That anyone who's willing to listen ...

And it says "to everyone who conquers ..." And to conquer means to anyone that is willing to face the challenges in their life and to choose to learn. Choose to not stay stuck in the past; not to get stuck in focusing on the negativity and the problems. But to anyone who is willing to rise above; to gain greater insights and wisdom and move their lives forward in faith.

To anyone and everyone who is willing to listen to God's Spirit and make it a priority, and to everyone who has a desire to overcome and do the work to move through the challenges to learn and to rise to higher levels, what will happen? They will receive three things.

And the first one: they will receive some of the **HIDDEN MANNA**. You know, manna was the bread that God gave to the children of Israel in the desert when they were brought out of slavery. Manna represents the bread of life: spiritual food; spiritual nourishment. And it is something we must use daily. You know, that we are willing to listen to God and connect with God on a daily basis.

Remember the manna? That it spoiled every day? They couldn't hoard and keep it; they just had their daily bread. And the fact is: we just need to turn to God and get our daily bread -- the daily guidance.

How many people ever feel like you'd have to have all your ducks in a row, and you've got to know every single step of the process before you start? Anybody like that? I mean, and what this is saying is: it's your daily bread. Trust God will guide you daily. Don't try to live so many days ahead. Trust God in the present: *right now*. To have God speak to you and guide you on what it is you are meant to do *today*. Sometimes we like to get so far ahead. And this is saying: just get your daily bread. You know, seek God daily and you will receive the daily nourishment that you need.

And then the second one: it says you will receive **A WHITE STONE**. A white stone represents freedom. Back then, when there were prisoners, to show that that they were actually free from prison, they were given a white stone to be an identifier that they were actually free.

You know, sometimes in our lives, we don't feel like we're free. We feel like we're trapped. We feel like we're stuck. We feel like we are limited; that we are inhibited; that we're being blocked; and there are obstacles keeping our good from us.

And this white stone reminds us that we're free; that there is actually nothing holding us back. Most of the things that keep us tracked are the limited mindsets and beliefs that we have. But the reality is: nothing is holding us back. We are absolutely free! Free to choose; free to change; free to create.

"I am free."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am free."*

"Nothing is holding me back."

[With congregants:] *"Nothing is holding me back."*

"I am free to change."

[Congregants:] *"I am free to change."*

"I am free to choose."

[Congregants:] *"I am free to choose."*

"I am free to create."

[Congregants:] *"I am free to create."*

"I am free!"

Together: [with congregants] *"I am free!"*

Take a deep breath and grasp the depth of that understanding: nothing is holding you back. You are absolutely free: free to let go, free to forgive, free to change, free to create.

Victor Frankl wrote these words about freedom. He said, *"The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there are always choices to make. Every day, every hour offered to us to make a decision, a decision which determines whether or not we submit ourselves to the powers that threaten or rob us from our very selves and our inner freedom."*

That every day and every moment, we have the freedom to choose our mindset, our decisions, our actions, our attitudes. And this white stone is a reminder that you're free. In this year there's nothing holding you back from creating and manifesting and expressing what it is you desire.

And then the next thing it says, and on that white stone will be written **A NEW NAME**. You know, in the Bible, a name was more than just a name. It represented your nature. It represented a shift in your consciousness and your mindset. Like Abram's name was changed to Abraham. You know, Sarai's name was changed to Sarah. You know, Saul's name was changed to Paul. It always shows a shift in consciousness and a shift in the responsibility and the work that you're now being called to do. So it is showing an elevation in the direction of your life and what it is you're meant to do. You know Moses' name ... Moses means "to draw out." He was drawn out of the Nile by the Pharaoh's sister. And his job was to draw out the slaves in Egypt.

And so, a name is more of your nature. A name is what your calling is. A name is what attributes you stand for and are meant to express and embody in all areas of your life.

And so, when we talk about a new name on your white stone, it is about listening and tuning in of what our spirit is calling us to express or embody more in this new year. And that new name could be honesty. Maybe it's to be more honest with ourselves and others. Maybe it's to be more authentic. You know, maybe it is to set boundaries ... you know, better boundaries. Maybe it is to speak up. Maybe it's to let go. Maybe it's for healing. Maybe it's to focus. Maybe it's to inspire or teach. I don't know what it is, but I guarantee you, all of our souls are calling us to express and embody some greater quality that is a part of the unfoldment and the evolution of our souls.

And it says that **no one knows it except the one who receives it**. The fact is: nobody can go to the secret place for you. No one can listen to God's still, small voice for you. You know, that this is something we all have to do. This is a part of our personal spiritual journey: that we need to listen; that we need to tune within ourselves to hear our inner guidance.

And so, again, this Scripture is saying: to any and everyone who will listen, to any and everyone who is willing to overcome and learn and move their lives forward, they will be given spiritual nourishment. You will be given the awareness that you are free. And then, you will be able to open yourself to hear what your spiritual quality is for you to express in this new year.

Spirit is calling us. The question is: Are we willing to listen?

And so, right now, I just want you to pick up your stone; pick up your pencil -- one in each hand -- and just hold your white stone for a moment. Take a deep breath. And just again together affirm: *"I am free."*

Together: [with congregants] *"I am free."*

Nothing is holding me back."

Together: [with congregants] *"Nothing is holding me back."*

"I am free to choose."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am free to choose."*

"I am free to change."

[Congregants:] *"I am free to change."*

I am free to create."

[Congregants:] *"I am free to create."*

"I am free."

[Congregants:] *"I am free."*

And so, we're going to enter a little time of meditation and we're going to listen: listen to the still, small voice. Create a space and see if God will bring that word to us now in this time. And if it doesn't come at this time, it will become as a result of this time and our willingness to open ourselves and listen to the Spirit of God.

I invite you to close your eyes, take a deep breath, and just open your heart to God. Open your heart, knowing that Spirit is calling you deeper. And we are willing to listen. As we just listen to these words of this song as we enter a time of meditation:

[Soloist]: ♪ ♪ Something's calling me. Something's calling me ♪ ♪ A little bit deeper than I've ever been before ♪ ♪ Something's calling me ♪ ♪ Something's calling me ♪ ♪ Something's calling me ♪ ♪ A little bit deeper than I've ever been before ♪

Everyone, just take a deep breath. And with an intention to listen, we just open our hearts. To seek God with all of our hearts and just listen to the still small voice, knowing that God has a plan and a purpose for our lives. And so, we willingly open ourselves to hear that guidance and that intelligence to lead us to a greater experience in this new year; to greater levels of joy and peace and the fulfillment of the work that we came here to do as spiritual beings.

We ask God: *"Reveal yourself to me. Reveal your will for the work I'm called to do this year. Reveal my new name or spiritual quality or attribute that I'm being called to express and let shine in my life."*

Take a deep breath and listen. Open your heart and allow God to speak.

[SILENCE]

Just keep your heart open and allow the wisdom and the intelligence and guidance of God to come forth.

[SILENCE]

It may come as a picture; it may come as a word; it may come as an idea or a feeling. But just trust that God will show it to you in a way that you will understand best.

[SILENCE]

Don't force it. Just let it come to you. Let it come through you. Again, deep breath. And let's just take a few moments of silence as we listen sincerely to the still, small voice of God.

[SILENCE]

And if your word comes to you -- if your name comes to you -- just take your pencil and just write it on your stone. And if it doesn't, just keep your heart open, knowing that it will come forth in its right way and right time.

[SILENCE]

And so, we just give thanks to God for the guidance that has come, and giving thanks in advance, knowing that it will come in its right way to bless us and lead us and guide us; to allow our light to shine in a way that will lift us to a higher level and help us bring more light into our world. Amen.

Could you imagine if we set as one of our goals or intentions for the year to be better at listening? Could you imagine what a difference it would make in our relationships? Can you imagine what a difference it would make in our relationship with ourselves? And our trust and our faith in God and that sense of closeness? Of knowing that the intelligence and wisdom of God is always trying to seek us; is always trying to express us.

Something is always calling us deeper. The question is: Are we willing to listen?

God bless you all.