

There's this house...it sits on a stretch of back road that I would take from my mom's house to my sister's when we all lived in Michigan. There was nothing else around this house whatsoever. Whomever had bought the plot of land seemed to have lucked out for themselves, having found this little patch of earth that could just be theirs with no one else really around, not a lot of traffic, just a place where they could build their house and have it be whatever they wanted. It was kind of fascinating watching them begin to build because it became evident really quickly that this house was going to be immaculate, two stories, with tons of front facing windows to let in the light, and whenever Kristin and I would drive past it we would wonder what it would look like when it was finished.

And then...one day, it all just kind of stopped. No more construction. No more feverish working. Nothing. It was like someone had hit the pause button the building of this house and then forgot that it had ever existed, and suddenly driving past this house became fascinating in an entirely different way because you just kept waiting. There had to be more. There couldn't be any possible way that this house was going to be left as it was, not really a house at all, but the shell of one, left to languish in the ever changing Michigan seasons. I always wondered, as I watched it go through winter after winter of snows leaching more and more life out of what once was, as

trees and growth took over to the point that you started to not be able to see what once might have been there, I wondered, just what on earth happened? And I never found out. Eventually, there was one year when I came home and I drove my usual route from my mom's to Jenn's, cruising way too fast down Ann Arbor Road that I realized, it was finally gone, whether collapsed under the weight of years of neglect or torn down, I didn't know, but there was a weird kind of sadness to the realization. What could have been if whatever had happened hadn't happened? What in the world happened to this could have been beautiful house? What could have been if this house hadn't remained just a bunch of walls and hollowed out holes for windows but had gotten the chance to become a house made of living stones.

I want you to imagine for a second what it had to have been like for the disciples, for the early church as they faced down this question of who are we and what are we supposed to do now? Let's start with the disciples, the disciples of this particular gospel. You wanna talk whiplash of emotions! In a matter of probably an hour, this is what they've gone through: they have shared the last supper with Jesus which probably came with a nice nod of normalcy, just Jesus and his boys sitting around, enjoying a meal together, with laughter and casual conversation, but then there's all this talk about body and blood and betrayal and things are starting to feel not

so normal. They've watched Jesus kneel before them and with vulnerability and intimacy wash the sweat and the dirt from their feet, giving them a new kind of commandment to follow, to love, to serve, not only each other, but all of God's children, as he has loved them so dearly, so completely.

They've literally just listened as Jesus looked at Peter, Peter of all people, and told him that in a couple of hours, he's going to deny with all his might that he even *knew* Jesus let alone was his best friend. And then all of the sudden Jesus is telling them to not let their hearts be troubled, even though it's becoming pretty evident he's going to die, and oh by the way, now they're going to be in charge, and not only that, but they're going to be in the position of doing works greater than what Jesus did during his time on earth. What in the world?! How do you process any of that, let alone *all* of that?!

Fast forward to the early church, particularly the early church of 1 Peter and you have this ragtag group of people who never knew Jesus, never saw Jesus, are simply operating on the belief of what they've *heard* about Jesus, all the while having to put up with and endure round after round of persecution because of that still shaky, still building up a foundation belief. They're still trying to get their faith feet planted firmly on the ground, while the world around them perpetually intercedes and tells them that their faith is wrong, harmful, detrimental, pick your adjective and tries to break apart

their newly formed community as best as it can. Then in the midst of that they get this letter boldly proclaiming to them that they are God's chosen people, not only that but since they are chosen it is *up to them* to proclaim God's mighty acts and then ya know also not rest on their laurels but make themselves into a church of living stones, who don't just say that they believe in Jesus, but actually *live* like they do. Somehow even in the midst of intense persecution they're also supposed to ya know figure out how to not only form a church, but *be* the church.

You have to imagine that for both of these groups there's a thought kicking in the back of their heads like, man, Jesus, this faith thing is hard enough without throwing the added pressure in there of actually *doing* something with it. For the disciples, there has to be this urge to just want to deal with the emotions of the hear and now, worry, grief, anxiety, fear, without adding the fate of faith and the pressure of somehow doing works greater than Jesus in there as well. For the early church, there has to be this tug to just say, we're only starting out, things are hard, we don't even know what kind of faith stones we're working with here, let alone trying to figure how to turn them into living stones that actually are able to go out and *do* something in this world which seems bound and determined to fight us tooth and nail about everything that has to do with Jesus, the church, and faith.

And I think...we get that instinct, that desire, because let's face it, the world is *hard enough*, being people of faith is *hard enough*, without all the added pressure of actually like, being the church beyond our four walls. We too hear this message that we are God's own people, chosen for this, that we are called to works like Jesus, big and bold and great, and we just kind of want to say, ya know what, we've built the frame of this house, isn't that enough? What do you mean we actually have to not only finish the job, but actually like make it a living, breathing thing? Far, far, far too often we think that being the church means sitting contentedly within the confines of our four walls, wherever those four walls are these days, and saying the words we always say, going through the motions of worship, and knowing in our hearts that we believe in Jesus and the resurrection and hope. We think that's enough, that that's who we've been called to be. We somehow think that doing the bare minimum of faith means we're living into our calling as God's people, means we're out there absolutely being the church, but as much as that would be nice, because let's face it, that's easy and non-threatening and low pressure. That is not being a church of living stones. That's being a church of a hollowed out frame of a house, a good façade with no substance whatsoever.

We don't get to build ourselves up as the church and then spend the rest of our time resting on our laurels, puffing ourselves up as God's chosen people who have zero interest in actually *acting* like God's chosen people. Don't get me wrong, it is an immense gift to sit back and say, my gosh, God has chosen me, chosen us, as beloved and precious, exactly as we are, without any requirements for admission to this group. And it is an immense gift to say thank God I have a church community that loves me and cares for me and that I can worship with on Sunday mornings. But, honestly, what is the point of any of that if it doesn't actually make a difference in the world around us? What is the point in having faith in a God that calls us to love one as God loves us, if we're uninterested in sharing that love with anyone else, at least anyone else who looks, thinks, or acts differently than we do? What is the point of claiming we're the church if we have no interest in actually *being the church*?

Imagine if the disciples had looked at each other and been like guys, this is gonna be hard, so why don't we just keep this between us? Or at least the people we know? And what if we maybe scrap the whole eating with sinners, standing up against oppression, speaking out against corruption, and turning the world upside down with love and compassion thing? What if we just keep it simple? God loves you. Believe a little bit and ya'll'll be fine.

That seems good enough, right? What if the early church would have been like this is too hard, so we'll just talk amongst ourselves and no one needs to break out of our four walls and talk about this, we're good, we've got enough people right here? The living stones of God's people would have turned into frozen blocks of hardened nothingness, and none of us would be here proclaiming faith in a God who turns this whole world upside down and calls us as we are.

So who do we want to be? Called, claimed, living stones of 2020 that we are. Are we going to be the people, the church that rests on its laurels and says, we've been around this long, things will be fine as they are, as we grow a little more frozen and stuck with each passing moment. Or are we going to dare to say that we refuse to become some empty façade, proclaiming a faith that really makes no difference in the lives, in the people we are once we leave these walls or turn off the worship feed? The church is meant to be a living, breathing thing, not just in one place, but out in the world, because *we are the church*, we are God's living stones building the church everywhere we go. Are we going to be a church that people know exists simply because our building is standing here for however long or are we going to be a church that people know exists because we're out in God's world living like we not only exist, but like we matter? **AMEN!!!**