

Of all the things I'd like to get out and do, building that stone wall of mine's tippy top of the list. But as you might be aware, rocks are heavy. And I'm tired. In the meantime, I'm also studying up. There's a certain amount of precision to make stone walls work right. You can stack rocks however you like, and they'll stand for a time. But for them to stand for a long time, there's an art to the labor. To do it right, you've gotta start with dirt. There's a lot of digging deep enough that the freeze won't shift the ground or rain wash out the foundation. Lay a subterranean sidewalk with the flattest, honkin-est chunks of rock you've got. Fill in the gaps with little ones, and the whole thing should look like a dry stream bed designed by anal retentive engineers. Then you build up. Most stone walls are basically two exterior walls leaning towards the middle, knit together by stone shims on the inside. The walls leaning in support each other and the shims keep 'em level. Every so often, a long heavy stone'll reach through as a perpendicular brace tying everything together. Keep building up, and let gravity be your mortar.

It sounds simple enough. But there's more. The angle of the lean remains consistent. No stone's left bulging out. Layers stay level. And probably the most important: the place where two stones meet gets bridged by the next stone up. That place where two stones meet is called a joint, and because it's made of nothing, it's weaker than the stones themselves. If there's pressure from the inside pushing out, a stone won't spontaneously split in two, but the joint could give. To strengthen that joint, lay a stone on top of it. The weight distributes away from the gap down onto the solid stones. To build without mortar, you've gotta make the forces on the stones act in your favor. Gravity pushes down, distributing weight all the way from the highest stone down to the dirt below. And what doesn't distribute down goes out to the sides, running the length of the entire wall.

In other words, there's a hundred ways nature wants the wall to fall, and there's a technique for every one of those that doesn't just deal with the natural forces, they turn 'em into assets. The strength of the wall depends on every stone doing its part. Foundation stones serve as much of a purpose as keystones. And cornerstones are pretty important, too. The cornerstone matters 'cause there's a lot of force coming at it. We appreciate the work cornerstones do so much that we slap dates on 'em. Sometimes we even put stuff inside them. Our church has a Bible and a Prayer Book tucked away in there. But cornerstones do more than sit there and look pretty. And they do more than bear the weight above them. Cornerstones signal a change in direction. There are no cornerstones in the middle of straight walls. They're at the corners. I know that's obvious, but think about it. A regular foundation stone has lateral forces acting on it from both sides, but they act in a straight line. Cornerstones still deal with lateral forces, but they come at the stone from different angles. Nature wants the stone to give. And for the structure to hold, the cornerstone's gotta be solid. The stone itself has to be right for the job, of course, but it can't do it without help from the stones around it. Really, every stone in every part of the wall affects the stability of the cornerstone, some more than others, but all of 'em contribute their weight and their redirected natural forces.

Jesus says the cornerstone he's gonna use isn't up to snuff. He builds his entire kingdom from the cast-off of the world. From a building perspective, that'd be like stacking your whole life on top of a crumbly flake of shale. But that's the point. We think we know how to do stuff. Because we've figured out how to use the forces of nature to our advantage, we think we must be clever. And because we're so clever, we understand the world, and if we understand the world, then surely we understand God. But Hubris means nothing when the divine architect shows up. Jesus says we don't know a pebble from a clod of dirt. His kingdom isn't designed to uphold the forces of this world. It's designed to redirect those forces.

I've always thought this parable was about a mistake on the builders' part. They couldn't see how valuable that rejected stone was. There's value in every stone. If it can't be a cornerstone, it could be a capstone, or a tie in, or crunched up into a bunch of shims. Every stone has a use. That's great, but I've been thinking about it differently lately. Because while that cornerstone matters, the other stones are absolutely vital. You can have the most perfect cornerstone on the planet, and it won't mean a thing if the stones around it don't pull their weight. If the courses aren't level, if joints aren't covered, the entire wall'll weaken, and all that'll remain is a lone cornerstone by a tumbled down pile of rocks.

Y'all ever played jenga? It's surprising how much the tower can stand, and there's always a gasp when someone takes out a bottom piece. But the tower can stand. It's not the most secure thing in the world, but it remains. Likewise, in an excellent wall, you can knock out a cornerstone and the structure will stand. It'll need quick repairs, but it'll be okay because the rest of the wall bears the load. I kinda think of Peter as that knocked away cornerstone. It made no sense at all for Jesus to choose Peter. He was faithful but also dumb as a rock. Surely one of the others would've been a better choice. But no, Jesus wanted that one. This world would never pick that faithful fool, but Jesus did. When the Passion unfolds and Peter denies, that cornerstone's crumbling under the weight of what he's done. Peter goes on to find his fellow disciples grieving, but they're supporting each other, too. Thomas covers Andrew's gaps, John's presence levels Judas' absence, each of 'em another stone redirecting worldly force for the strength of God's kingdom.

Y'all, on our better days, we're a bunch of Peter cornerstones. We don't come here as ideal cornerstones. We come for a lot of reasons, but none of 'em are to show off. We're here because we're a heap searching for purpose. We know rejection, and we search for redemption. And no matter where God puts us, we're included. Some'll be cornerstones, some foundations, some those neat little bits that stick out so you can climb over. Here, we've got purpose. There's a beautiful thing that happens when we come together: the forces acting on us strengthen the entire body. When one of us grows weary, our neighbors support us and hold the weight awhile. Being the Body of Christ is heavy work, but with the help of this church, the burden is easy.

One last thing. When the stone the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone, there's a beautiful chain reaction. The people in charge thought too highly of themselves, and Jesus takes the castoffs to build with instead. In other words, the ones in charge get rejected. We've seen this before. Jesus always goes for the discarded first. But when the castoffs get chosen, the ones in charge become the rejected. And we know Jesus loves the rejected. So maybe there's a shot at redemption for them, too. There's this whole cycle of renewal. They may be rejected but they don't stay that way. Now they're integral to the work again. Maybe there's a necessary humbling before God puts them to use. But God will put them to use.

In the eyes of God, no matter what or who you are, no matter how useful this world says you are, no matter how pointless you feel, God's kingdom has a place perfectly suited for you just as you are. You are needed here. You are wanted here. We need you to build up and support this place alongside us. We'll cover each other's faults, hold each other's weight, lean in for a little more strength. 'Cause being the Body of Christ may be heavy work, but with the help of all these stones, the burden is easy.