

How long does it take to build a church from scratch? I guess that depends on what our definition of the word “church” is. Maybe you’ve never really thought about it, but we use the word “church” in a lot of different ways. “Church” can be a verb, something we do. For instance, right now we are “doing church,” as opposed to what we will be doing in an hour, doing snacks and beverages at our fellowship hour. “Doing church” is when we gather together around the Word and Sacraments in worship and praise to our Lord God. Usually, “church” is a noun. This morning you drove your car from your home address to 4671 Bellwether Lane, Oxford, FL. These 5- acres with a church building, a pod, and an expansion going on, are “the church.” We can even narrow it down more. I might be sitting in my office off the fellowship hall, and think, , “oh, I have to get something in church.” “Church” in that sense is just the part of the building that we use for worship. that’s a church.

Some of you may know that in the New Testament, “church” always has a different meaning. It never means a building or a piece of property, rather “church” refers to the gathering of believers. The church isn’t bricks and mortar and classrooms and roofs and parking lots and trees. The people are the church. And isn’t that true? A hurricane could level all the buildings on our property, but we would still have a church, since “church” is the people here, not the buildings we meet in. And let’s say that this hurricane would even take all of our lives...we would still be a church. But instead of being the Church Militant on earth, we would be part of the Church Triumphant in heaven.

So now that we’ve reviewed a bit what “church” means, let’s ask ourselves again, how long does it take to build a church from scratch? To answer that question, let us look at the master builder himself, Jesus Christ. He was on earth visibly for 40 days between his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven, and do you know what he was doing? He was building a Church. You see, the chief purpose of his 3 years of ministry was to be the world’s substitute: to live under all of God’s laws and to obey them perfectly in our place, and to die that awful death on the cross that we sinners deserve. But come Easter Sunday, that was all finished. He just had one more task to accomplish before he went to heaven; Jesus had to build a Church. And the fact that we are here a couple thousand years later proves that Jesus did a pretty good job building his church in those 40 days. So let’s look at “The Church Jesus Built.”

The first words of our text read, “As you come to him, the living Stone – ” Doesn’t that title strike you as odd...a “living Stone”? Have you ever seen a stone that was alive? Of course not! By definition, a stone is something that has no life in it. Years ago there was a fad called “Pet Stones.” The joke was that it was a very easy pet to take care of. You didn’t have to feed it, clean up after it, groom it, or bathe it...it was a low-maintenance pet. Pet stones do not move. Pet Stones are about as dead as can be. If you were doing some gardening, and out of the corner of your eye you saw a stone walking around, I guarantee you that would grab your attention. In the same way we are drawn to Jesus, this living Stone. “As you come to him, the living Stone – ” Peter writes. There is something unique, something fascinating about Jesus, something that catches our interest.

I want you to notice something about Peter, the writer of our text. Here he was, not college-trained, but a simple fisherman. But look how well he knew his Bible. As he compares Jesus to a living Stone, he is able to think of three Old Testament passages that elaborate on how the Savior was like a stone.

First he quotes, “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and

the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” There is a difference between ancient cornerstones and our modern-day ones. Our cornerstones tend to be mostly commemorative objects, maybe having a year inscribed, but with little or no architectural benefit. Ancient cornerstones were the first stone of a building laid. It had to be cut and placed to absolute perfection, because all the walls of the building would get their angles from that cornerstone. The stone had to be strong, since a great portion of the building would rest on it. And doesn’t that describe Jesus well? He is the foundation of everything. He is where we start, where it all begins. Without Jesus, there is no Church. You might think that’s pretty obvious, but so many people do not place Jesus as the cornerstone. Some feel that the Church exists to make this world a better place. To them, the Church is here to wipe out hatred, to build bridges of understanding among the races, to feed the homeless, to build habitat for humanity. All these things are great and noble ideals, but they are not the chief cornerstone of the Church. Forgiveness of Sins through Christ is the cornerstone, and if Jesus is removed from that cornerstone position, is there really Church anymore?

Peter shifts gears a bit and finds another biblical metaphor for this living Stone. “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” Now what is a capstone? Think of a Roman arch. The two sides of the arch rise and lean toward each other, and right where they meet, a capstone is inserted. Again, this had to be just the right size and shape. If the capstone was too large, the two sides of the arch would fall outwards. If it were too small, the arch would collapse in on itself. Here is our living Stone, Jesus, who is that precise capstone. He fits perfectly for what we need. We needed a Savior to be a human being, just like us, so that he would be subject to all of God’s laws. But he also needed to remain True God, so that his blood would cover the guilt of all mankind. Jesus is the perfect keystone. We needed a Savior who understood the problems and temptations we go through daily, and we have that in Jesus. Because we’re so full of sin, we needed someone who was going to love us and forgive us no matter what we do. Jesus fits the bill flawlessly. He is that tight-fitting capstone.

There is one other passage that Peter pulls out of the Old Testament, calling Jesus, “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” In the previous quote, we heard that the builders rejected this perfect capstone. We are reminded of how the prideful religious leaders felt about Jesus. They hated him, because he had dared to tell them that there was something wrong with them spiritually. In our first lesson from Acts 17, we saw the same attitude in the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica. And this is the same attitude that many people today have about Jesus. They will gladly accept a lovey-dovey Jesus that tells us just to be nice to each other. But a Jesus that says in our Gospel, “I am the (singular) way, the truth, and the life,” turns a lot of people off. They would be content if Jesus was only “a way to heaven, one of many truths, and one of the ways to life.” But people in their pride still stumble over the living Stone because they feel his claims are too confining. “Surely he can’t be the only way to heaven!” they say as they stumble and bumble their way through life.

And don’t we find ourselves so often right there with them, stumbling over Jesus. Our pride gets in the way. We want to serve Christ, but we want to make sure that we are honored for our work, instead of being content that Jesus receives all the glory. We stumble over the rock when we want to hold onto sins, knowing that Jesus has died for them all, so what’s the harm of carrying a few pet sins we really enjoy? We stumble

over the living Stone when we will give Jesus an hour of our time of Sunday morning, maybe pray to him before most meals, but dedicating our lives 100% to Christ? Serving as a volunteer in the church C'mon, it's just not possible. We have real lives too.

When we've stumbled enough in our sins, we finally are brought to the realization that we need to be on our knees, in shame and repentance. We've stumbled...stumbled right into the forgiving arms of Jesus, who always takes us back. Peter would have known that as well as anyone.

Then Jesus does more than just take us back, he uses us as stones to build up his Church. Jesus isn't the only living Stone in our text...we all are! "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house." I like that Peter calls us stones, not bricks. If you go to Home Depot and buy a few hundred bricks, they are all going to be basically the same...same weight, same shape, same height. Stones, on the other hand, are all different from each other, just like we are. Wouldn't it be boring if we all looked the same, had the exact same interests and experiences? But we aren't.

Further, he calls us "a chosen people." Just think, before the world was even created, before the first trees, before the Sun and Moon even existed, your name was written in God's Book of Life. God chose you from eternity to be a member of his Church.

The Lord has made us into "a royal priesthood." When was the last time someone called you, "Your Majesty"? When was the last time people bowed down for you wherever you went? God sees you as a king or queen. You might not feel like it, you might not look it in this life, but rest assured that you are part of God's royal family.

And we are all priests. What percentage of Christians are called workers? Less than 1%. What percentage of Christians are priests? 100%! We all are. We all have the privilege to come into the Lord's Temple and offer up our prayers on behalf of us and others. In the Old Testament, only a tiny fraction of the people had this opportunity

Why did God make us into this "chosen people, royal priesthood," and so on? "That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." We were as good as dead. We were in the dark, prison house our sin with absolutely no way to get out. But just as Jesus rose from his bonds of death, he has raised us up from our darkness and now we dwell in the light of forgiveness and peace with the Lord.

So many people in your neighborhood don't have that peace with God. They aren't a royal priests like you are. They continually stumble over Christ, the living Stone. We declare God's praises when we show these people what Christian lives look like. When we take the high road by not getting back at someone, by not gossiping, by helping out someone who doesn't deserve our help, we are declaring God's praises. We also do that when we tell people how important Jesus is to us, and how excited we are to be members of God's family. God has built you into his Church, not just to take up space, but each one of us has an important task to do in his kingdom. Yes, we spend our lives declaring God's praises to a darkened world.

If we look at our church building, what stones could we do away with? If we took out one block after removing some stucco, we would definitely notice it. It would stick out every time we came to worship. What stones can we do away with in Christ's Church? Can we say, "this second row, you are out of the Holy Christian Church...we don't need you anymore"? We can't do without them; they would be missed. I don't care

if you are a confirmed life-long WELS member, a 4 year old, or a first time visitor who's never been to a Lutheran church. Jesus has built us all into an important part of his building. All are precious to him. The Church Jesus Built has a place for you. And won't it be a marvelous sight when we see this completed building, as we gather around God's throne in heaven, and for all eternity, celebrate our membership in The Church Jesus Built.