

Unnoticed stones

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When she knew she was dying, my grandmother took me to see the cornerstone of a small brick church in my hometown of Kansas City, Missouri. I didn't recognize the sign outside. It was a Baptist church, I think. It was pretty rundown, but still in better shape than the neighborhood. Overgrown vacant lots were everywhere; it was like visiting an abandoned church in the jungle.

But here we were, my grandmother showing me where to pull the car over so we could get out and see. She took me to the side of the building where we could look at the cornerstone. Sure enough, it was 2nd Christian Church—a common church name for the first Disciples of Christ church started by African Americans in a given community.

As my grandmother tells it, her grandparents helped start that church. Like her, they were laypeople. But a small group of them had moved to the Missouri side of Kansas City after starting a church on the Kansas side, and they made this building their church home.

When my grandmother took me to see this church, I was in seminary, the first in my family to attend, and she was at least partly to blame. She told me she remembered seeing her mother in a group photo outside this church, sitting on a bench or a chair, young enough that her legs were too short to reach the ground. Since then, this little congregation moved, eventually becoming the church in which I grew up. The building went on to house several more churches, as far as my grandmother knew. But the cornerstone was still there. She was pretty sure some founding documents were tucked inside.

Then she told me this: she wanted me to come back for this cornerstone someday. “That was our history in there,” she said. Surely someone in charge of the building would understand and would have the stone removed for us if we asked, so that our family and our church could have it. She’d wanted to do it herself, but it seemed too late to her by then. So she delegated the task to me. My grandmother died the next summer.

Because I’m such a first-rate granddaughter, I’d forgotten about that trip and conversation until I had the chance to reflect on this week’s lectionary readings. The 118th Psalm tells of this stone, originally rejected by the builders, becoming the chief cornerstone. The stone they didn’t want is now the stone holding the whole edifice together. The stone I had already forgotten could be holding some of my history and our church’s history inside—along with revealing that I might not be the first church planter in my family after all.

Chuck Smith recounts a popular myth about the building of Solomon’s Temple. The stones used to build it were cut at a different location, he says, and then shipped to the building site. The cornerstone happened to be shipped unmarked, and for a long while, no one knew what the piece was for or where it belonged. Later, the lead builder asked the stone makers when they would send the cornerstone. Of course they’d already sent it, and when the builders went looking for it, they found it in a field—grown over by a jungle of weeds, tossed aside, rejected.

Sometimes we just don’t know what we’re dealing with. One day Jesus is being celebrated, honored, seen as the saving king of Israel. A few days later, he is arrested, beaten, and crucified. The people think their chief cornerstone should look different than this guy, be tougher and probably taller than this guy...*this can’t be the one.*

I wonder how often I’ve missed God and God’s doings because they showed up unmarked. I hope I don’t miss the cornerstone of the church my great-times-several grandparents built. I pray this Palm Sunday finds me keeping an eye out for other rejected stones. Who knows? They may be exactly the ones holding us together.