
When Stones Fall

Mark 13: 1-8

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on November 15, 2015

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In May 2014, the Huffington Post called Duke Chapel the most spiritual place in North Carolina. In that same year, the Durham Magazine named Duke Chapel, the building, the “Best Landmark” in Durham. Duke Chapel is the icon of the university and this became crystal clear when watching one of the Duke Forward Capital Campaign videos. In one scene, as a camera swept across the sky and caught the spires of the Chapel from above, at that very moment, this angelic voice on the video said, “This is Duke University.” Duke Chapel is at the heart of the university, at the center, attached architecturally to the Divinity School, which was the first established school at Duke. Institutions and buildings of faith at the center of a major research 1 university. This may be a shocking realization in a post-Christendom age with the rise of the so-called “nones,” those with no religious affiliation and the so-called “dones,” those done with religion all together. The location of the iconic Duke Chapel may also be surprising because perhaps you think that Cameron Indoor Stadium is the premier religious structure on campus. Don’t get me wrong. That building is significant in its own way as the embodiment of civic religion, especially if we believe what one audio commercial declared during a Men’s basketball game last season—“Cameron Indoor Stadium, a building with a soul.”

“Do you see these great buildings?” Jesus asked. The large buildings with large stones. “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” Don’t have a heart attack. Jesus wasn’t talking about Duke Chapel in his day but maybe there is still a word for us today. Maybe Jesus is speaking about our human tendency to always want to go up in grandeur. Humans often reflect “the gothic principle” (Howard Thurman), wanting to reach higher and higher and always fly. Remember the Tower of Babel in Genesis? The people of the earth had brick for stone and said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves...” “Do you see these great buildings?” Symbols of power and dominance and privilege and legacy. Large stones and large buildings. Stalwarts of perceived religious and cultural stability. Icons of institutions.

Do you see these great buildings with their tops reaching toward the heavens? But maybe the call of God is not to be raised higher to the top but to come down, get down, fall down, a spirituality of descent with our feet on the ground. “Not one stone will be left. All will be thrown down.” In an ironic way, I understand because Duke Chapel had its own stone to fall in July 2012, which is why we’re in here, sitting in our cozy chairs. There’s brick and mortar and limestone for sure but nothing is forever. Nothing is really in stone no matter how much we attempt to uphold or support it. Stones do fall and when they fall it can be a disruption to the norm, an upheaval of standard patterns, making us feel insecure. Old ways of doing things have to change. When you change space it really does change you. When stones fall, we can be rattled to focus on the essentials and non-essentials. We might have to move offices to Northgate Mall or the Smith Warehouse or to East campus when stones fall. One stone can disturb a whole system and place you in perpetual disequilibrium. There’s a loss because what we once knew is no more and as the external landscape

is altered our inner topography shifts as well and the inner work is usually the hardest work. “All will be thrown down.” All will be disturbed.

But not all is lost when a stone falls. There are gains as well. You can get a perspective from the outside of the building that you would not normally have from the inside. When stones fall, you have to go outside, have to deal with the outside and the outsider. You have to face the world God loves. Jesus “came out of the temple,” the religious and political center of his time, the location of everything that was held dear, one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world. He came out of the building, that is, the religious and political institution. Jesus steps out of what is central, what is core, with its institutional clout and influence and moves to the margins, to the periphery in order not to be suffocated by bureaucracy. Sometimes in order to get ministry done you have to move away from the institution, even the institutional church. And when he comes out, we learn that while on the Mount of Olives he’s “opposite the temple,” opposite the religious institutions and denominations because Jesus is in opposition to anything that can hurt people. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not anti-denomination although some say we are in a day of post-denominationalism.

What Jesus opposes is any form of institutional religion that destroys people. This is why he has to get out of the institution and out of the great building. He has to remove himself from places where people put more trust in a system than the Savior. Those in power are out to get Jesus throughout the gospel of Mark and reject him, but the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. “Do you see these great buildings?” Do you admire these large buildings and institutions? “All will be thrown down.” Why? Maybe because as Jesus talks about earlier, institutional religion only makes us walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in marketplaces and have the best seats in our churches and places of honor at banquets while we devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers (Mark 12). Long robes and long prayers are not necessarily signs that one is following Jesus. According to Jesus, it may be a sign that our religious institutions have lost its purpose and soul as it devours widows and other outcasts. This is why Jesus never came to save institutions but to save people. He never came to prop up denominations or grand buildings. He never said, “Come, follow me and let’s build a great building or religious institution.” He does say, however, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” He does say, however, “Follow me.” And when you follow him, outside the center of power, you’ll find yourself in spaces and places that are outside of the institution. You’ll find yourself, as one of my colleagues writes, on the streets because Jesus is the Word on the street. You’ll find yourself with widows and orphans and the marginalized of society. You’ll find yourself with those being devoured by religion, the rejected among us, including the rejected cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

Jesus leads us to leave any institution or great building that is a mausoleum or museum because it no longer serves the purpose for which it was created. Stones do fall and perhaps some stones need to fall because there are some great institutions that need to crumble because they only crush people. This is why it’s important not to be too attached to any building or institution—because when that building crumbles you will crumble too if your life is inextricably bound to it. Don’t give your life for or to an institution because though institutions don’t bleed, they will make you bleed. Rather give your life to the one who bled for you. Great buildings don’t breathe because they don’t give life. There’s only one who is the resurrection and the life. “Do you see these great buildings?” They don’t

have a beating heart. Yet widows do, orphans do, Duke housekeepers and maintenance workers do—those who clean bathrooms, sweep floors, empty trash—the stone the builders, the institution, rejected are actually the cornerstone. Ironically, they keep the institution standing and running; this is why I call Oscar Dantzler, “my boss.”

What if we recognized the often overlooked, the rejected ones, as the cornerstone? Not the ones in long albs or saying long eloquent prayers, but the ones offering their bodies, many times minoritized bodies, in service for the wider community. What if we built a community with the margins, the voiceless, as the cornerstone? How would we look different, act different, sound different? What practices would have to change? What theologies would have to fall? “Do you see these great buildings? ... All will be thrown down.” And what will be left? The people, the “living stones” being “built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:4-6). The stones of great institutions and towering buildings will go down while other living stones will rise and form the Church.

When stones fall, it is not the demise or end of the Church because the Church is not a great building or institution; it is a people whose theological cornerstone comes from the margins—a poor, homeless, rejected Jesus from the ancient near east. In his light there are only shadows of greatness because he is the Great One, the Great I Am. In his presence, there are really no great buildings that are as beautiful, as life-giving as his beautiful, yet broken body. In fact, his body breaks the great buildings into pieces so that his body, our body, becomes a living temple of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tears down institutions to build his living Church for a living and loving God. In the movie, *Romero*, about the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador, who was assassinated while presiding at the Eucharist because of his ministry on behalf of the poor, Romero’s voice is heard saying, “A bishop will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish.” Stones fall and stones need to fall and the contemporary mantra is “the church is dying” but as long as Christ is alive, the body of Christ, visible and invisible, will never die.

Do you see these great buildings? They will eventually be no more when stones fall. “No one stone will be left here...” Then we’ll have to ask ourselves, “Do we see a great church of a great God?” The buildings and institutions may crumble but the cornerstone will remain. What we think of as great has to be destroyed. The institution has to die in order for Jesus to truly live. And then we’ll see how the reject is actually our Redeemer. When he’s the cornerstone we discover what’s truly important in the life of faith—the widows, the orphans, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the underside, the rejected just like Jesus, many of whom are not even here today. And why aren’t they here? (I don’t think it’s because it’s so hard to find parking at Duke) Maybe we so badly want to uphold our great buildings and institutions even when we know and see the world crumbling all around us on university campuses and all over the world.

I say let more stones fall if it means we keep Jesus as the cornerstone. Not more stones from Duke Chapel but from our ideological and theological structures. May they be thrown down for the cause of Christ in order that we may know who is the chief cornerstone of our lives.

I keep a piece of the stone that fell from the Duke Chapel ceiling at my office desk as a reminder that nothing is forever, not even great iconic buildings or institutions. “All will be thrown down” Jesus says as he’s nearing his death on a cross. And if Jesus is going down, he’s not going down alone; he’s taking every oppressive, powerful institution with him. But before he goes down he will go up on a cross demonstrating that it costs something when institutions crumble; it costs something to do ministry from and on the margins. There can be collateral damage but some stones need to fall. “All will be thrown down” but Jesus will not stay down forever. Underneath the rubbles of human existence, the cornerstone will rise and live forever. One lamb-like stone will be left standing as if it had been slaughtered. In other words, the grass withers, the flower fades, stones fall, but the Word of God, Jesus Christ, stands forever. Amen.