

First Fifteen: February 7-11
Focus Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:3-9

Monday: Matthew 16:13-18

Going Deeper: *“Who do you say that I am?”* This is the foundational question where our individual journey of faith begins. It is also the collective starting point for our gathering as the “church.” Not that we always come down on the same answer all the time, but that we seek to grow in our understanding and experience of our faith in Jesus as the messenger of truth regarding our faith as the basis for all our questions. I have found this story in Matthew fascinating for many years; Jesus’ declaration *“I will build my church on this rock”* raises many questions for me. How about you? What do you hear in Jesus’ words? He is really saying Peter is the foundation of the Church. Or is Jesus telling us something about Peter’s faith and his willingness to step out, trusting what he knows and has experienced in his relationship with Jesus even though his understanding is limited. Peter was far from the perfect disciple, and by that, I mean someone with out flaws. While at the same time Jesus used Peter’s desire to embrace his faith even though in his efforts to follow Jesus, he made some missteps! But nonetheless it is upon this “rock,” Peter’s imperfect and yet adventurous faith Jesus declares he is building his church. Each of us continue the message of Jesus’ declaration. As we explore our answer to Jesus’ question to each one of us... *“Who do you say I am?”* we become, with our own imperfect faith, the rocks upon which his church is being built.

Prayer: Help me Lord continue to wrestle with this question, help me not merely settle on the easy answer, or one that has been scripted for me. Help me fully explore what you are asking of me and embrace my less than perfect understanding knowing it is my faith, and willingness to go deeper with you that helps you build your church. Amen.

Tuesday: Hebrews 3:1-6

Going Deeper: The writer of Hebrews sought to reach those of the Jewish faith, helping them understand Jesus’ message and ministry as their messiah. These words from the first 6 verses of the 3rd chapter of Hebrews tie the message of Moses as their liberator with Jesus as God’s chosen architect for God’s ongoing work! In these verses we again here a message about the church, but not in reference to a physical structure; the writer declares we are God’s house! Our lives reflect our faith in God’s goodness and provision, and even more importantly God’s love and grace which is given to us... Is this what the writer means as we are called God’s house? The central verses within these words for me is Hebrews 3:4... *“Every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything.”* (CEB) These words remind me of Paul’s teaching in his letter to the Philippians where he assures us that God is at work within us. (Phil. 1:6) They remind us that God is the ultimate architect and we our God’s work, God’s house. Our lives are indeed the church! This is not the way we typically think of “the church,” and yet if we will allow ourselves to be open to this, I wonder if we can also begin to embrace the idea that God uses each one of us through our trusting God’s faith in us (Make sure you

hear this, God has faith in you!) and believing our well of hope never runs dry because of Jesus' love for us.

Prayer: Loving God, the idea that you have faith in me, most likely far more than I have in myself is what I need to hear today. I embrace the truth that you are at work not only in my life, but in everything else in your world. Give me faith to see beyond my own ability and knowledge and trust your steady hands will lead me, and us as your Church. Amen.

Wednesday: 1 Peter 2:4-6

Going Deeper: *"Look! I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a valuable cornerstone, a sure foundation: the one who trusts won't tremble."* (Isaiah 28:16 – CEB) Isaiah's "living stone" as we understand it is Jesus, and what Peter, the one who Jesus renamed "the rock" according to John 1:42 seems to be telling us is that we all share in this characteristic of our "Living Stone." Our lives are "living stones" as we are open to the movement of God's Holy Spirit who works within us shaping us through our faith in God's love into a spiritual house. Which I suspect is yet another name for the church. But what is the Church? Is it the church anywhere or place God dwells and gathers among those who are open to God's call and movement in their lives? Peter understood firsthand, even in our failings we are still precious to God, and like Peter we must understand being God's people is not about perfect morality, as much as it is about perfected love, being able to find love and share love in all situations. This is what I believe Peter is referring to as our offerings of "spiritual sacrifices" given to God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, our Living Stone, solidify my faith... help me ground all I do in your love for me so I may reflect your love through my interactions today. It is easy to love some people, but Lord there are others that are not. Help me see them through your eyes, so I can look beyond our differences and find the truth that binds our lives together... your love for all. Amen.

Thursday: 1 Peter 2:7-10

Going Deeper: Luke 19 tells us of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. As he does his followers cry out in praise to God. The teachers and leaders of Jerusalem criticize Jesus telling him to tell his followers to stop. His response reminds me of these words from 1 Peter... *"I tell you, if they were silent, these stones would cry out."* (Luke 19:40 – CEB) 1 Peter 2:7-10 continues to refine our response to God as the church, God's living stones; we are to be light within the darkness, a voice that calls out in tenderness in times of loss and sorrow, we are those whose arms are open and filled with compassion because we understand firsthand how God's healing love has accepted and embraced us. Where has God given you the opportunity to become God's living stones, the place others find a friend, a listening ear, a kind response, and a loving word? If you have the Message, I encourage you to look at 1 Peter 2:4-10 in this version, I believe this version truly captures what these words mean for us and who they call us to become.

Prayer: Almighty God, this truth, that I am one of your chosen messengers of your love leaves me wondering what if I fail? What about the times when I get it wrong, and act out in ways

that undermine my faith in and love for you? Help me to cling to your message of grace and mercy, knowing you are stilling working on me, as you seek to build your church, your living stones who carry your message in their lives even when we fail as we trust in your tender mercy to lift us back to our feet. Amen.

Friday: Acts 11:20-26

Going Deeper: The first followers of Jesus were referred to as belonging to “the Way.” (Acts 9:2) But here in these verses in Acts 11 they are given a new name, “Christians.” What does it mean for you to be called a Christian? It is quite possible this name was meant to be a reproach; its origin is uncertain. Nonetheless it is quite descriptive. The original meaning of the word meant either little Christ, or those who belong to Christ. It seems from the beginning the church has been know not so much by what we believe, but who we follow, not by our theology but through our engagement with the community in which we live our lives with distinction... marked by love, mercy, and compassion. Or as Paul taught hope, faith, and love, these are the foundation of our witness, and they are all that will ultimately remain as our testimony... and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Prayer: I am a Christian! I am a follower of Your Way. I am and a living stone being placed among others as we become Your Church within the masterful hands of our God who is the architect of everything! Thank you, Lord, thank you. Amen.