

Matthew 21:33-46

Pentecost 18 + Proper 22A + October 8, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
A Cornerstone of Grace and Virtue

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 21:42-44: "Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Reject the cornerstone, and the building cannot stand.

Before Jesus speaks of cornerstones, He tells the parable of the wicked tenants, in which the master of a house plants a deluxe vineyard with all the amenities and leases it to tenants. But when the harvest draws near and he sends his servants to collect what is owed, the tenants rebel. They abuse and kill them. Repeatedly.

The master of the vineyard then makes the strangest of decisions. He sends his son. "They will respect my son," he says, although there's precious little evidence of that.

The wicked tenants prove themselves wicked. More than that, they prove themselves to be *worse* at reasoning than the master of the vineyard. They say to themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance." Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? If they kill the master's son, why would he not make them his heirs and give them the vineyard?

Why not? Because the master loves his son. He has given the tenants every opportunity, far more than fair, to shape up and fulfill their part of the bargain. But the tenants will not turn. So what will the master do, now that his son is dead? Even the elders listening to Jesus know: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." It's only right. Right?

The elders get something else right, too: they perceive that Jesus is talking about them. These leaders of what's left of Israel are the latest in a long line of wicked tenants; and if anyone should know better, it is they. The Lord did not just give Israel a vineyard, but the entire Promised Land. He promised it to them forever, as long as they remained His people. All He asked was the thanksgiving, praise and obedience of His people; but they rebelled against Him.

So the Lord sent His servants, the prophets. Time and time again through the history of Old Testament Israel, He sent His messengers to proclaim His Word, remind His people of His promises and call them to repentance; and time and time again, they rejected His servants. They beat some, killed others and stoned others yet. When their rebellion cost them the land, the Lord sent prophets to them in their Babylonian exile; and because of His promised mercy, He brought them back and restored the land to them once more. But, despite some brief times of repentance, still their hearts were far from Him.

Now, in Matthew 21, the Lord of the vineyard has sent His Son, His only-begotten Son from eternity. They will respect His Son, will they not? They have heard Him speak, seen Him

work miracles and fulfill prophecy, and weighed His words for three years now. To those with faith, there is no doubt that Jesus is the Christ. Will they not respect the holy Son of God who walks among them, who calls them to repentance, to know God's grace and favor once again?

Jesus knows: they will not. They reason that if they put the Son to death, they will inherit the vineyard: literally, they believe that killing the Son will please the Father in heaven. And what will happen if they reject the cornerstone? They will be crushed. If they get rid of the Lord of life, all that is left for them is death. In actuality, within forty years Jerusalem will be utterly destroyed because they reject the Son.

Are the leaders swayed by the parable, even a little bit? Do the words of Jesus give them pause as they perceive He is speaking about them? It would appear not. When Jesus tells this parable, Palm Sunday is already past. By the end of that week, the tenants will take the Master's Son and have Him crucified: even as Jesus tells the parable, they are seeking to arrest Him. They only bide their time because they fear the crowds. But within a few days, they'll reject the cornerstone. And if you reject the Lord of life, all that is left for you is death.

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The application is plain enough: apart from Christ, there is no life. Any religion, philosophy, worldview or personal faith that doesn't include the Gospel is ultimately doomed because it has rejected the Christ who gives life to this world. It would be easy enough today to go after various religions that reject Christ in favor of their own laws and often wreak a lot of havoc along the way. But I suspect you're not really interested this week in a lecture on world religions. You might be occupied with the horror of a lone gunman in a hotel in Las Vegas, or you might be troubled by the general decay of the world. I'd like to approach this a little differently today, so bear with me for a few moments while I connect some dots.

Ancient philosophers held that man possessed reason, virtue and appetites. To sum it up in the words of one (Alanus), "The head controls the belly through the chest." You have a head – a mind, an ability to reason and hopefully practice common sense. You have a heart – the seat of virtue, like faith and justice, fortitude and chastity. You have a belly – you have appetites and desires that growl when left unsatisfied. Our appetites need to be controlled, or else we'll make them into gods. To control our appetites, we need our minds and hearts: we need to make commonsense decisions based upon virtue.

For this to work, there must be such a thing as a *standard* of virtue. There must be a standard of justice – a universal law of right and wrong. There must be such a thing as absolute truth, a foundation on which all make decisions. There must be a standard of fidelity, or else we will only be faithless. If there is no such thing as a standard of virtue, then our appetites will decide what is good: without virtue, we'll use our minds to make all sorts of reasonable arguments to support whatever vices we desire.

Let me put it another way: if there is no such thing as truth, then it's left to me to decide what is true. If I get to decide what is true, then I'm going to use my mind to argue that *whatever I want* is a good thing. The one who has no virtue will live only to serve his desires. The mind without a heart becomes the belly's slave.

Take a look at society around you, and I think you can find plenty of examples. If there is no standard of fidelity or chastity, then people can argue that any sort of "loving" relationship is good. If there is no standard of justice, then life becomes cheap with little thought for the rights of the unborn and the disabled. If there is no standard of truth, then I can argue that you

should be silenced just because you're upsetting me. Worse: if there is no standard of truth, then I can argue that the church should depart from God's Word for society's favorite perversion.

If there is no cornerstone, I can build whatever my appetites demand. But if you reject the cornerstone, all that is left for you is death.

As Lutherans, we're most known for our focus on forgiveness in Christ, and rightly so. However, you're also in a great position to fill in a blank that ancient philosophers could not: you not only know that virtue exists, but you know the *source* of all virtue. It is Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that you find justice, for He is the righteous Judge of the living and the dead, who suffered God's justice for your sin so that you might be forgiven. It is in Jesus that you find truth, for He still preserves His Word among us today: His law so that we know what is right and wrong, His Gospel that we might know His fidelity and grace. It is in Jesus that you find mercy and compassion, for it is He who has died for the sins of the world and is risen again with forgiveness and healing for all who believe. It is in Jesus that you find true beauty – the surpassing beauty of holiness, and so you yearn for the day of resurrection when the ugliness of sin is no more.

You also know your sinfulness. You know your appetites and desires, especially the ones you'd rather not tell me about, and how they seek to lead you astray, if not enslave you. You know that you can rationalize all sorts of sin, only to end up with a plagued conscience later on. That's why you daily repent, confessing your sinful thoughts and desires, along with your actions. That's why you *don't* just say, "I'll work to be more virtuous from now on," because virtue isn't found in you. It's found in Christ; so you rejoice that Christ, the Author of all virtue, forgives you and dwells in you. You live a life of ongoing repentance, of more Him and less you. You rejoice to take every thought captive to Christ, to submit your desires to His Word and will. You seek to think on holy things, that your mind might be guided by His virtue; if it is not, it will be guided by your vice.

In other words, you know that Christ is the cornerstone; and by His grace alone, you are a living stone built upon Him, and so you have eternal life. Where Christ the cornerstone remains, there is life – eternal life purchased with His own blood, enough to redeem the world. Where the cornerstone is rejected, only death remains.

The bigger point is this: I do not expect the world to become safer anytime soon, because the world continually rejects Christ more and more. As long as society holds to the idea that there is no truth and that you're free to do whatever seems right to you, as long as this is the mantra of most media and most education, people will act on their desires without regard for what is good. They will act on their sin without regard for Christ. They will hurt others and destroy themselves. The violence and irrationalism of today should not surprise us, and let's be honest: you're not going to change a world that sees no need for change. That's why I don't expect a safer world anytime soon.

And yet, I do not say all of this to leave you troubled or despairing. In fact, I speak this day to give you comfort and hope. Christ is always present, always true and always faithful. Cornerstones don't wander from their building, and greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world.

You are here this day because you know of Christ, because He has gathered you in among His people. You know He is the cornerstone upon which all is built, and you know that by His grace He had made you His own. By the work of the Holy Spirit, you continue in repentant faith with the confidence that, even though this world is hell-bent on destruction, the kingdom of heaven is yours for the sake of Jesus.

You gather here, and by the grace of God you cling to Christ the cornerstone. You acknowledge the Word of the Lord to be good and true, and you submit your thoughts and desires to it. You hear His Word. You sing His praises. You confess your sins: you acknowledge the virtue of His law and declare it right, even though it means you are wrong. You confess Jesus to one another and all who will hear, so that they too might believe and be saved. You gather at His Supper, you receive His body and blood, and the angels rejoice as God preserves His people.

And as God preserves you here, He establishes you as a light to shine in the darkness. He hasn't ordered you to change the world: forgiven in Christ, He has set you free to live holy lives. You speak truth, you do good to others, you practice justice and mercy. As you do so, you are the Lord's instruments; and as you do so, it is a witness to the world. As this world grows darker and more chaotic, people will crave safety, order and light. I am convinced that a church that remains built on Christ the cornerstone, His law and His gospel both, will only shine brighter with His grace and life in the years to come.

Likewise, those who live in Christ will shine. The one who keeps his word will stand out in a world that cares little for truth. The couple that enjoys a marriage of fidelity may well be a beacon to those who have undergone all sorts of terrible relationships. The single Christian who practices chastity will startle others with the idea that there is something greater than appetites to live for. It may well be that your simple obedience to Christ's Word in daily life creates opportunities to share Christ and the hope that you have within you.

The hope that you have is not a phony optimism. We are not immune to suffering and sadness. Violence and affliction trouble us. We mourn those who die. We weep with those who weep. We pray for those who live. We speak of Christ crucified and risen again to all who will hear. We know that death could befall us, quietly or violently, at any time; and we look with confidence to the resurrection.

That will, of course, draw all sorts of criticism, hostility and spiritual attack. Where Christ has His church, the devil builds a chapel. When this happens, remember that greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. Commend your worries to the Lord in prayer. Know that He uses all things for your good. It can be no other way, because even now death and devil are enemies under His feet, and there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God.

The light of Christ will not just draw trouble. It will draw new and fellow believers, brought out of the darkness by Christ and His grace. The Lord will add to His people according to His good and gracious will: it is not given us to worry about how many here or there, but simply to stand on Christ the cornerstone and shine His light to all who will hear.

So He shines on you. You know His grace and favor, and you rejoice that He continues to be merciful even when you fail. Courage, my friends: this world is no more evil than it was a week ago. It is simply that evil sometimes is a bit more exposed. Hold fast to Christ, the cornerstone, and remember this: you do not only do so that you may shine His light to others. Far, far better than that is this: Christ shines on you. In Christ, eternal life is yours. Because, in Christ, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen