

October 2, 2005  
Exodus 20:1-17, Matthew 21:33-46  
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### “The Cornerstone of Faith”

A week ago at the church, we heard the sound of relentless pounding outside the office windows. All day long, a huge metal weight was raised by a cable and dropped to pack the soil inside a large cylinder in the ground. The geotechnical engineers must have determined that the soil was not firm enough to support the concrete pillars of the bridge that will be built to connect the gathering space in the new building to our sanctuary. All day long, the force of the metal weight pounded the earth and compressed the soil so that the foundation of the pier could be poured onto solid ground.

Jesus knows that a building has to have a strong foundation. Then, the cornerstone must be carefully chosen and carefully laid. The cornerstone connects the walls and bears the weight of the whole structure. Although construction techniques have changed, we can all appreciate the importance of a carefully designed building with structural integrity. Quoting the 118th Psalm, Jesus notes that God has chosen a cornerstone that even the well-trained builders reject. The builders reject the stone because it does not seem suitable or strong enough to bear the weight of the building. Of course, God is not building a physical structure but a spiritual kingdom. The rejected Son becomes the cornerstone of the Kingdom of God.

Why would the people reject Jesus? He tells a parable that gives, in short form, the tragic history of God's people. God sets the people free from bondage and gives them the Promised Land. God gives them the Ten Commandments to serve as signposts to a responsible life of freedom.

Instead of worshipping God, the people put their own desires first. They rob God of the harvest that belongs to God. Instead of providing for the people, the leaders steal from the people. Instead of living together in a community characterized by justice and charity, the people ignore the poor and profit from injustice. People honor neither their commitments to their spouses and children nor their obligations to their neighbors.

When God sends the prophets to call the people to obedience, the people ignore the words of the prophets. They beat the prophets and kill them.

Finally, God sends Jesus to reclaim the people. The leaders kill him, too. This one whom they reject has become the cornerstone of God's Kingdom.

I can understand why we reject God's ways. It is terrifying to trust a God who says that we are to turn the other cheek and forgive the people who hurt us "as many as seventy times seven." The call to love our enemies and give away our possessions makes me more vulnerable than I want to be. Jesus tells me to be a servant, when my instincts tell me to be

in charge. He says that following him means denying ourselves and picking up our crosses. I want to satisfy my desires and have it all.

When times are tough, who has the courage to put their neighbor's needs ahead of their own? When times are hard, I want to bolt for the door.

This same Lord calls us to love people who aren't like us and whom we may not even like! So, folks would choose a different cornerstone for life.

This is World Communion Sunday. Christians from around the world have a great deal to teach us about what it means to have Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of life. In an article entitled, "The Next Christianity," Dr. Philip Jenkins of Penn State notes the dramatic growth of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere. By the year 2025, the number of Christians worldwide is expected to reach 2.6 billion, making Christianity the world's largest religion. By 2025, sixty-seven percent of Christians will be in Africa, Latin American and Asia. More than that, the rapid growth is also bringing change to the form of Christianity. In the Southern Hemisphere, the church is seeing a new vitality. In many of these areas of growth, Jordan contends that Christianity will become "a new transnational order in which political, social, and personal identities are defined chiefly by religious loyalties." (The Atlantic Monthly, October 2002, p. 55) In other words, a person's Christian faith, rather than national identity, ethnic group or economic class, will determine a person's orientation and ultimate loyalty. The depth of this joyful commitment challenges us to ask ourselves whether Jesus is the cornerstone of our lives.

In our sophisticated, relativistic and multi-cultural world, we wonder if Jesus really is sufficient to bear the weight of our lives, our hopes and our dreams. Our own self-doubt and insecurity lead us to imagine that we see cracks and flaws in the cornerstone of our faith. The British theologian Lesslie Newbigin spent almost 40 years as a missionary in India. In that multi-cultural and religiously plural context, he learned what it means to proclaim that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of God's plan of salvation. Newbigin states that Jesus Christ is the center of history and the revelation of God's absolute truth in history. He claims this without arrogance or imperiousness. Newbigin writes, "The claim of the Christian community is that in Jesus the absolute truth has been made present amid the relativities of human cultures, and that the form which this truth took was not that of dominance and imperial power but that of one who was without power, or rather, whose power was manifest in weakness and suffering." (The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 163) This suffering love of God revealed in Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of life.

To understand our lives and the future of the world, we need to look to Jesus. Over the next two Sundays we will have an opportunity to talk together in small groups about how we will build our lives together in Jesus Christ. I pray that you will take the time to participate in one of these conversation groups so that we may make sure we build the future of our church on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. A life or a church built on the cornerstone of Christ has an unshakable foundation.

Miss Myrtle was an elder in the first congregation that Bunny and I served. She lived in a small, four-room tenant house that one of the farmers in the church rented to her for a

token amount of money. Even though she had little of the world's goods, she was rich in the things of God. Her home was always neat and clean, with a quilting frame set up in the living room, sweet tea and cake in the kitchen and an empty chair for a neighbor or a friend. Lots of people stopped by to see Miss Myrtle. Her husband had died early in life, leaving her to raise their children on her own. She didn't have much formal education; but she was one of wisest people I have ever met. She lived off a small income from selling handmade quilts, and the gifts of hams, and vegetables that folks would leave on the front porch. No matter what was going on in the church or in the community, she met every situation with a sense of peace and a heartfelt confidence in God's goodness. No matter how troubled we might be or what problems we poured out to her over sweet tea and cake, she brought to every dark situation the light of Christ. Jesus Christ was the cornerstone of her life. That tiny, flimsy four-room house was to me a solid and unshakable sanctuary of grace.