

Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC
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Matthew 21: 33-46
World Communion Sunday

We've been covering a lot of ground on parables lately and today you got to hear a really harsh one. Kind of uncomfortable, and a bit simplistic. But of course sometimes messages don't need to be incredibly nuanced or deep to have meaning—after all depending on how you define a parable Jesus offers us 50 of them. That is more than an entire year's worth of sermons. I've mentioned before that some of the great preaching professors say that every preacher has no more than 40 decent sermons in them per year. And so Jesus has already exceeded that number by a lot. And so we can't expect they all are going to be as gracefully nuanced and eloquent as the last. But sometimes simple is good. Sometimes the best message is the one that is the most earthy, or somewhat vulgar. But there is such a violence to this parable, a jarring disquietude that sits at its core. But I think that this gives us some insight into where Jesus' mind was because he knew somewhere deep down that the path he was on, that the path of resistance, and of justice was headed, just like all the prophets who had come before him, to a violent end.

Known as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, we get to go back to the vineyard for our fourth week in a row—we have spent all month in this vineyard—we have practically moved in and are tenants of our own now. And on this visit to the vineyard we hear about a landowner builds this lovely estate, it even has a winepress. Now that's a big deal. An ancient winepress was not some sort of mere kitchen appliance. It was a big apparatus, almost like a swimming pool, cut out of the limestone. They would have an upper trough called a *gath* where workers would crush the grapes, connected by a channel to a lower vat called a *yekeb* that would collect the liquid. And of course this was a profitable thing to have. This owner builds this estate finds some people to lease this estate and he goes and travels far away. At harvest time the landowner sends people to go collect a portion of the harvest, as would have been agreed to in the terms of the lease, and when he does this the messengers he sends are violently beaten and murdered. And so the landowner hears about this and sends his son, hoping that if he sends his own flesh and blood out there they will realize the seriousness of this, that they will respect the agreed upon contract but instead the tenants think if we eliminate this man's son then maybe the title deed will be ours. I want to know more about this son who agreed to go try to collect rent from these people—imagine if you were given that assignment knowing that the last people who showed up there trying to do the same thing didn't make it out. But after all, this is a parable so we have to just take it as it is.

We don't need much explanation to figure out who is who in this story. The landowner is God, the vineyard is the world, the messengers who come are seen as the prophets that have been rejected or harmed and the landowners son represents Jesus who is rejected and killed. Jesus is taking a cosmic saga, a theological drama, and bringing it down to earth, quite literally, into the vineyard in a digestible, small-scale story that is simple and easy to understand.

For as simple as this parable might be it's got a great line, probably the most famous part of it. You've probably heard it before, "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Jesus did not come up with it on his own, it is a quotation of Psalm 118. In fact Psalm 118 is a favorite of many, in that same psalm right after this is the equally famous line, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." In the Hebrew Bible the symbolism of cornerstones meant something. In any monumental structure, if we're taking a tour, the tour guide always wants to show off the cornerstone. The first stone placed, upon which the rest of it was built. There's something fascinating to us about that. Usually they might put a plaque on it. And today this is still a concept though more ceremonial—but back then the entire structure would be constructed around this first stone. And since it was so structurally important if a stone was oddly shaped, or had some rough edges or was jagged a little bit they'd throw it aside. And so the idea of a rejected cornerstone was that it was useless. That nothing of import could be

built around it. But God in the Hebrew Bible was all about surprises and would use the least likely person, the rejected, the lost, the forgotten as the main character in the construction of something new. King David comes to mind, rejected by his own family, but ultimately uniting Israel and playing a key role in this grand drama of redemption. In fact in Hebrew, David means “the beloved one.” The jagged one, the rejected one was ultimately the beloved one.

And so Jesus is employing this same idea here—that in God’s world the stone that builders rejected will be the stone around which everything is built, the stone that will hold up the entire world, that in the upside down world God imagines and creates the right cornerstone won’t be the perfect cornerstone, the pretty cornerstone, or even the most likely cornerstone but will be the stone that at first glance is cast aside. Or in other words that those who are on the margins are the ones who will become the center of our collective life. Those who are forgotten, the ones who feel left out, will be the core of everything, the ones that hold all of us together, the source of our structural strength and integrity.

It’s really a beautiful concept isn’t it? That Jesus comes to tell us that it is so human, in our fickleness, to reject the truth when we see it or hear it because we’ve been confused by all the wrong things. That we chase perfection, we seek some kind of conformity so that we can be the cornerstone we think we need to be, but that actually it’s all of our jagged edges and strange angles, and discoloration and weird little things that make just the right cornerstone. Like David that those that are rejected put in the trash heap are actually the “beloved ones.”

I did a little bit of digging into this whole business of cornerstones. Just playing with this idea a bit. And one of the things I learned is that it will be 234 years ago this week that the cornerstone to the White House was first laid. Apparently it was a grand affair. George Washington showed up in full masonic regalia. The Irish architect James Hoban oversaw the ceremony—they laid the cornerstone, fitted it with a plaque. Poems were read. Prayers were uttered. One of those prayers, which in retrospect is a bit sad and kind depressing said, *I pray to Heaven to bestow the best of Blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men [sic] ever rule under this roof.*” We need that prayer now more than ever, we ought to still pray that prayer, switching out the gendered language of course. But that’s a prayer for you. John Adams wrote that.

But strangely that cornerstone lasted a single day. The morning after the multi-ton cornerstone was nowhere to be found. Such a vexing mystery this was that later on Teddy Roosevelt and Harry Truman would commission forensic researchers to find it, using x-rays and radar technology and still it’s location has never been found.

This seems to be a theme in DC because the very next year, George Washington shows up again in full masonic regalia to lay the cornerstone of the US Capitol building. Bearing a plaque made by a local silversmith. Prayers were uttered, poems read. But like the first, this one disappeared completely as well. The US Geological Survey have yet to uncover that silver plate nor the cornerstone. They don’t know if it was stolen, destroyed in the War of 1812. We don’t know. But it’s interesting that a cornerstone, something so heavy, so massive, is something that could even be stolen in 1792 or that there would even be a fascination with destroying such a thing.

But even Jesus way back then knew that there was a great symbolism in cornerstones. That the stone around which we build something reflects in a certain way the heart of what we believe—a personification of the values around which we are centering our shared life together. And we center our shared life together around Jesus. Who also was taken from this world, violently. Who was also with us one day and gone the next. Taken from us, by those who had different ideas around which we ought to gather around, by those who didn’t want his life and ministry and the bread and cup of the communion table to be the center of it all, because that threatened their power, it offered a liberation that was a step too far for them, a liberation that offered voice to those they wished to remain voiceless.

This idea of a group of guys in 1792 snatching away the White House cornerstone in the dark of night, or the Romans lurking in the shadows of elite spaces plotting to snuff out Jesus, or what we see happening today with the rise of Christian nationalism—is all a very similar theme.

Sometimes how I wind down at night, believe it or not, is I watch other church services on YouTube for fun. I'll just find a random church somewhere far away from here just to see what they're up to. And there is stuff out there that you would not believe. The troubling thing is in the ways that you can see this human impulse to chip away at who Jesus is until he becomes something so unrecognizable. I'll give you an example, I saw this one church who had at the front of their sanctuary this painting of Jesus. He was shirtless and had these oiled up bulging muscles, he had not a 6 pack but a 7 pack, was wearing an American flag bandana around his forehead and.... was carrying an automatic weapon. And they had this right up front. And I just wonder what Jesus does when he sees this. I bet he just weeps. Like they have got me so wrong. That they have rejected the precious cornerstone of who and what I am and have replaced it with something so faulty, so troubling, so destructive. He probably realizes that in his time and now that impulse to reject the chief cornerstone is still with us. Because we think that a strong cornerstone carries a weapon and represents a world superpower but really the cornerstone that God has laid for us, that God gave us, is one that is about mercy, and love, and humility.

Today is World Communion Sunday—which first became a thing right as tensions were building right before World War II. Which was a time in which fascism and nationalism were on the rise, where borders were going up, not coming down, and the creators of this dared to imagine that the balm of the world might very well be the communion table around which all of our earthy distinctions vanish and we come to to find mercy and humility and to be called “the beloved one.” And if we might just build these tables everywhere and take up bread and cup instead of arms then we might just have found our cornerstone. For them Jesus was not a buff soldier carrying a weapon, but the opposite. The one who comes riding on a donkey, bringing with him nothing but bread and wine, and good conversation. They wanted us to remember that cornerstones can vanish, they can be covered up, they can be abstracted, stolen in the dark of night, but the cornerstone we have in Jesus can never be shaken if we keep the open communion table the primary symbol of his ministry.

I have a colleague in Boston on social media who I knew when I lived there who every week on her social media does something called a “Sabbath Sign Out.” This is when she goes dark on email, on communion. She's clergy so for her this is Friday night. And she always posts some very typical photo of whatever she's doing, that is on its face so non-monumental but then proceeds to write the most beautiful three sentence reflection on it. It's incredible. So a few weeks ago she posts a photo of take-out leftovers and says, this, it reminded me of our parable today, “Sabbath Sign Out: blessed are the leftovers that make a meal. Blessed are you who feel leftover, left out, left behind, for you shall be fed and found. Rest and remember that you and I and all are beloved.” Now you see what I mean... If that's how she talks about take-out imagine how she talks about everything else.

So, Blessed are the leftovers. The leftover cornerstones, the leftover food, you and I who sometimes feel left out and leftover. For in God's world, all of us, the leftovers, shall be fed and found.

May it be so.

Amen.