

Christ the Cornerstone!

Isaiah 5:1-7, Mark 11:27–12:12 (ESV)

March 23, 2003

“Have you not read this Scripture: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?” This question for “the chief priests and the scribes and the elders” now becomes a question for us: Have we read this scripture? Have we believed it? Have we learned it and appropriated it into our lives? Have we heard this good news?

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” Jesus quoted this from Psalm 118, verses 22 and 23. What is remarkable here is that he quoted it at the end of a parable which he had retold from Isaiah 5. We have just heard that, too. This quote from the Psalm makes the retold parable apply directly to the continuing significance of Jesus Christ. Have we heard this good news?

Isaiah 5 begins with a love song, but it ends with a terrible judgment. The Lord asks the people who heard the parable to judge between him and his vineyard for which he had amply provided but which had failed to yield grapes for him. Then without waiting for an answer he tells the people that he will destroy his vineyard and that they *are* his vineyard. The people had failed to yield justice and righteousness to God. Where is the good news in that?

As Jesus retold the parable, it was the tenants who represented the failed leadership of the people of God. The vineyard grew grapes, but the tenants failed to yield the harvest to the owner. Instead, they rejected one servant after another, finally killing the owner’s beloved son. This rejection becomes the key. The parable again leads to a question for the hearers: “What will the owner of the vineyard do?” Again without waiting for an answer (which was very unusual for his parables, for they usually sought an answer from the hearers), Jesus himself told them that the owner would destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. “The chief priests and the scribes and the elders....perceived that he had told the parable against them.” Then Jesus pressed the point with the question now aimed at us: “Have you not read this Scripture: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

The rejected son of the owner of the vineyard is identified with the rejected stone. But in this quote beyond the parable, God retrieves the rejected stone to make it the cornerstone. So the one telling the parable, the one whom “they were seeking to arrest,” the son who had foretold his death, hereby foretells his resurrection, his glorification. The retold parable becomes an occasion not only to respond to the

story and not only to respond to the will of God in general but also and especially to respond to the entire ministry, the life, death, and resurrection, of Jesus Christ in particular.

This move from rejection to resurrection, indicated by the verses quoted from Psalm 118, is confirmed by the next verse of the Psalm, familiar to us from the opening of our worship service: “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” “This is the day” refers not only to the day on which we say it, but also and especially to the day of Christ’s vindication, the day of his resurrection, the day of his great victory, the day when God reversed humanity’s rejection of Christ and execution of Christ, the day when God instead elevated Christ to the place of highest honor, glory, power, majesty, blessing, dominion, and dignity. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” There is the good news!

The parable of the vineyard which Jesus told identified him as the son of the owner of the vineyard sent to receive the fruit of the vineyard, the Son of God sent to the people of God, the son who was killed, the son who was thrown out. The good news comes in this twist which he added at the end of the parable, that the one rejected by the people is actually the one chosen by God. The ones responsible for building up the people of God crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead and made him the cornerstone upon which God himself built up the people of God.

It is necessary that good builders reject bad stones. Flawed, weak, cracked, or misshapen stones do not belong in a building. And the cornerstone is most important. It is the starting point. It has to be true in all directions, with corners cut on right angles, in order for the walls built upon it to be straight and for the building to be square. Otherwise, you might end up with a triangle shaped building, like some of them here in the Fan. What a striking image, that the builders rejected what was not a flawed stone but was the good and perfect stone, but then God overruled their rejection and made it the cornerstone, the most prominent stone in the building!

We are familiar with the language from the parable of Jesus Christ being the Son of God. But what does it mean that Christ is the cornerstone? Given that the parable to which Jesus attaches this image has to do with the people of God, this means that he is the cornerstone, or the foundation, upon which the people of God are built. At one time, the phrase “people of God” referred primarily to the people of Israel. But following Jesus Christ, it refers also to the people of Jesus Christ, the people of Christian faith, the Christian church. Christ is the foundation of the church, the true foundation, the only foundation. There is only one cornerstone from which the whole building starts. A number of other organizations could be built on a number of other foundations, but the church of Jesus Christ can be built only on the foundation of Jesus Christ himself. A church built on nationality, language, race,

wealth, social status, or anything else could be a cohesive organization but it would not be a church of Jesus Christ.

Insofar as we claim and hope to be part of the people of God, the reality that Christ is the cornerstone is of vital interest to us. Moreover, I want to expand upon this in two directions. First, Christ is also the cornerstone or foundation of our individual lives. “It is he who made us, and we are his” (Psalm 100:3b). Apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5). We might attempt to build our own lives on fame, wealth, wits, power, position, family, or any number of other things, but all of them will be sinking sand (Matthew 7:24-27). Those may deceive and suffice for a while, but in the end they will fail. So Christ is not only the cornerstone of the whole people of God, but also of our individual lives. We need to ask ourselves: What is the basis of meaning, security, purpose, confidence, direction, and hope in our lives? Upon whom can we and do we rely? There is only one right answer.

Second, at the same time that Christ is the cornerstone of the people of God and of our individual lives, he is also the cornerstone of the whole universe. “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3 ESV). “In him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17b ESV). The universe is not based on coincidence or accident. The universe is not founded on chance, chaos, evil, or death. Our lives are not governed by the fates. Instead, what Jesus reveals to us about the sacrificial love of the redeemer also stands behind all of creation. So, to be built upon, and united with, him is to be joined to the great movement, direction, and purpose of the universe.

It is good news that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the people of God, of our individual lives, and of the universe. It is also good news that he is the Son of God. To hold these two truths together rules out many errors. The Son of God is the cornerstone and foundation. The minister is not the foundation or source of the church. The session is not the foundation or ultimate authority of the church. The members are not the foundation or starting point of the church. The budget is not the foundation or strength of the church. The nation is not the foundation or basis of the church. The economy is not the foundation or security of the church. The one and only foundation is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We come here to worship God as made known to us in Jesus Christ, the one who was rejected and killed but who now has been raised and vindicated.

It is significant that the parable of the vineyard was first told against the leaders of the people of Israel. If they failed to yield the desired harvest, the vineyard would be turned over to someone else. But the question arises as to why this parable was remembered, why it was recorded, and why it speaks to us today. Its purpose is not for us to gloat over the failures of others, but for us to be warned and to learn from them. The word of God spoken in the parable is a contemporary

word, a living word spoken to us. The question is, Are we yielding to God the harvest he expects and deserves now? Or shall he have to seek yet another people? This is a question aimed directly at the Christian church in every century, at each congregation in every generation, and now it is aimed at us. Are we doing what God wants us to do? Or shall God have to seek yet another people? The parable is here in the scripture because of the temptation and danger that the people of God will reject Jesus Christ and his gospel yet again.

Look at the danger of failure and rejection. In the parable, the people working the vineyard failed to yield the harvest to the owner of the vineyard and rejected all the messengers sent from the owner, beating some and killing others, including the owner's beloved son. What this means is that they did not give God faith, commitment, obedience, justice, or righteousness, and that they rejected the word of God brought to them by the prophets of God and the very Son of God. Since none of us has ever encountered an Old Testament prophet or the Son of God in the flesh, we might think we are safe from the danger portrayed in this parable. But we do not get off so easily. How is Christ present to us today? In the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word of God. So the question can be reworded: Do we accept or reject the gospel of Jesus Christ? This question is squarely before the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today: Do we accept or reject the authority of the scripture as the word of God? Are we going to live by the Bible or by some other standard? Will we follow the teachings of Jesus Christ or the inclinations of society and culture? Do we believe that the faith once delivered to the saints is good enough for us, or shall we seek another? And so this question is also before Grace Covenant: Do we accept or reject Jesus Christ as made known to us in the gospel? Do we yield to God the harvest that is due, the harvest that he expects, the harvest that he seeks, the harvest that he deserves?

It all comes down to a question of authority: Who or what has the final authority in our lives? The importance of this authority is shown in the encounter Jesus had with the chief priests and the scribes and the elders before he told them the parable. The leaders rejected the authority of John the Baptist because they did not like what he had to say about their need to repent. The great masses of the people believed and understood that John was a true prophet, sent from God with a message from God, speaking the word of God to the people. The leaders rejected this authority, but they were too cowardly to say so. What authority do we recognize today? How do we answer this not only with our lips but also with our hearts and lives?

Now, given that Jesus Christ is the son of God and is the cornerstone of the people of God, as well as the foundation of our individual lives and of the universe, and given that the point of the story is not so much whether Israel accepted or

rejected Jesus as whether we accept or reject him, how does this word of God apply to our lives today? First of all, obviously, we are called upon to accept, to receive, and to rejoice in Christ as the cornerstone of our lives, and we are to yield to him the harvest that is due. This does not mean once in a lifetime, as at the moment of conversion. This means repeatedly, more and more every day. Again, Christ is present to and for us today in the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word of God. To accept him means not only to believe in him but also to rely upon him, to trust in him, to be loyal to him, to obey him, to grow in him, to live in him, to die in him and to live again in him. So to yield him the harvest means to have faith, hope, love, charity, justice, righteousness, and on and on.

Second, in that Christ is the cornerstone and foundation of the church, we the church are to build upon him. We are to do this is by building up the church of Jesus Christ. We do this through worship. We do this through giving. We do this through evangelism. It is the intent of Jesus Christ that his gospel to be proclaimed and that his church be built up. How can we build upon the cornerstone and foundation? Bring people to church and invite and encourage them to join the church. If each of us brought one new member a year, the church would double in size every year! We certainly reach out to all of you who join us by way of radio, too. We appreciate your faithfulness and regard you as a part of our extended congregation. We want you to consider us as your church.

Third, in that Christ is the cornerstone and foundation of the universe, we are called upon to live this out in the world, to have a mission in the world, to reform the world and to seek justice and righteousness. All around us, human society is crumbling. It is a frightening time to be alive. And yet, it is a wonderful time to be alive. Remember the foundation upon which we have been placed and built. Part of what we are about as the church is showing others where to place their feet, where to stand, on what to build their lives, on what to build their hopes. This is particularly important during this time of war. As uncertainty grows, as terror persists, as animosities increase, as casualties mount, remember the good news of Christ: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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