

“The Cornerstone”
Matthew 21:33-46
Sunday, October 2, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

King Duncan writes:

“There was a legend that was well known in New Testament times that in the building of the temple of Solomon most of the stones were of the same size and shape. One stone arrived, however, that was different from the others. The builders took one look at it and said, ‘This will not do,’ and sent it rolling down into the valley of Kedron below.

“The years passed and the great temple was nearing completion, and the builders sent a message to the stonecutters to send the chief cornerstone that the structure might be complete. The cutters replied that they had sent the stone years before. Then someone remembered the stone that was different than all the rest that somehow did not seem to belong. They realized that they had thrown away the cornerstone.

“They hurried into the valley to retrieve it. Finally under vines and debris they recovered it and with great effort rolled it up the hill and put it in place so that the great temple would be complete. The stone that had been rejected had become the chief cornerstone. Jesus, who had been rejected now reigns at the right hand of the Father. From rejection to rejoicing.”

Today I am going to share with you some Bible readings on the concept of “the cornerstone.” More than any one theme, Jesus as the cornerstone of our faith is the tie that binds us together with other Christians the world over. I’ll start with a few comments about today’s gospel reading from Matthew.

I. “Cornerstone” in the Gospel According to Matthew

When Jesus tells “The Story of the Wicked Tenants” to the Pharisees and to the crowds, it is an amazing thing. He stands before his enemies, the ones who will call for his torture and death on the cross, and he tells a story that portrays them as the bad guys.

The courage, the audacity of Jesus just takes my breath away!

He tells this story about the Pharisees to their face, in public, in the presence of crowds of witnesses.

He then quotes the Hebrew Bible at them, from his vast store of memorized scripture. “Have you never read in the scriptures,” he begins, in mock surprise, and then shares the quotation from Psalm 118:22-23, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.”

II. “Cornerstone” in the Old Testament

The passage would remind Jesus’ listeners of other references to a “cornerstone” in the Hebrew Bible. In Isaiah 28:16, for example, the prophet speaks a message of judgment on corrupt rulers in Jerusalem, and then makes this prediction concerning the change that is coming: “...thus says the Lord God, ‘See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.’”

Isaiah also uses the cornerstone imagery to criticize the leaders of Egypt. In Isaiah 19:13, he says, “The princes of Zoan have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded; those who are the cornerstones of its tribes have led Egypt astray.”

And in Zechariah 10:4, again, a prophet speaks against the leaders of the people and promises to raise up a better leader from the common folk: “Out of them shall come the

cornerstone, out of them the tent peg, out of them the battle bow, out of them every commander.” No longer will God abide the evil leaders; He is preparing a new leader from among the people.

Even the book of Job uses this symbol of the cornerstone. You may remember that the book of Job is a story or a play about a man who loses everything: his family, his flocks, his home, his land, his health, his wealth. The bulk of the story is then about Job’s friends trying to explain why all these bad things have happened to him.

Towards the end of the book, God addresses Job directly. In Job 38:4-7, God says: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

This climactic moment in the play brings home the concept that God is in charge. Where were you when He laid the foundation of the earth?! Where were you when he set Jesus as the cornerstone of the universe and “the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

This story would also be in the minds of the crowds and the Pharisees as Jesus speaks about a cornerstone. God’s unchallengeable authority; this is the wisdom of Job.

III. “Cornerstone” in the New Testament

In the New Testament, references to “cornerstone” imagery include retellings of “The Story of the Wicked Tenants” in Mark (12:10) and Luke (20:17). Acts 4:11 tells of Peter and John as prisoners of the Council, and of Peter giving an impassioned speech. He says, before the chief priests and the elders, “...Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the

cornerstone.’ There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians (2:20), writes, “...you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

Finally, in 1 Peter 2:6, the Isaiah passage is again quoted. This is what Peter writes: “For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘the stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Closing.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, makes the spirit of World Communion Sunday clear when he says, “If your heart be as my heart, give me your hand” (paraphrase). Simply put, our brothers and sisters in Christ are all who believe in Him, all who follow Him, and all who seek to serve Him. Jesus is the Cornerstone. He is the One whom the builders have rejected, “a cornerstone chosen and precious.”

As we share the bread and the cup this morning, let's imagine all our Christian brothers and sisters around the world sharing in Communion with us. And let's imagine all Christians, around the world, united in love and service to others. Together, we are "built...spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Together, we are the Church universal, the new Temple, in which the Spirit of God dwells.

And what about those who have not yet found Jesus?

Roger Lovette helps us with this question in his article for [The Christian Century](#) (September 20, 2005), entitled, "Dinner Reservations":

"A friend told me about an announcement in her church's weekly newsletter saying that next Sunday the church would celebrate the Lord's Supper. A new Christian with no church background saw the notice and called up my friend. 'I have two questions,' she said. 'It's about this supper thing. Am I invited and how much will it cost?'

"The world is still asking these questions. Can we come? And how much will this supper cost? The way we answer these questions will determine the kind of tenants we are. We still have much work to do. We must keep reminding one another that the table is not ours. We just work here.

"The vineyard belongs to God."

Come to the table. You are invited. Your supper ticket has been paid for by Jesus, the Cornerstone of the new Temple.

Amen.