

Tripping Over Jesus
October 2, 2011
Matthew 21:33-46

³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴²Jesus 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 amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

In our scripture reading for today, we catch Jesus in the middle of a confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders of Jerusalem. With two stinging parables (the one we read today is the second) Jesus charges the chief priests and elders with failure to produce fruits of the kingdom. In other words, they were crooked, missing the mark, out of whack, not on the level, not in plumb, with the way of righteousness that both John and Jesus taught. To add insult to injury, he told the chief priests and elders that racketeers and prostitutes were doing a better job of producing the fruits of the kingdom. Furthermore, because they could not manage to bear the fruits of the kingdom, they were going to be replaced by those who could so that God’s way of righteousness or “right-ness” might be made known to the world.

In the middle of this passage, almost like an interruption, Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone....” It seems the thread between the two pieces of this passage is rejection; rejection of the son in the parable, rejection of Jesus the cornerstone by the leaders – which turns out to be the same thing.

Other than driving by Cornerstone church almost every day for the last 91/2 years I have really thought much about the word “cornerstone.” I always thought those stones with dates and time capsules on corners of buildings were cornerstones. What do you know about cornerstones? How is Jesus a cornerstone?

Ever since the earthquake in Virginia the Washington Monument has been closed until engineers can completely survey the outside of the structure for damage. This week these engineers were in the national spotlight as they repelled from the tallest stone obelisk in the world. Now if you can follow my stream of consciousness, my mind went from the Washington monument to

George Washington himself. In addition to being our first president, George Washington was a mason, and he presided over the laying of the cornerstone for our US capitol building on September 18, 1793.

The cornerstone of the capitol is over five feet long and more than 13 inches thick, we know this from eye-witness accounts of the ceremony. However, after construction was completed it was and is below grade and out of sight. It is an important part of the foundation. According to a Masonic publication: *Early in the history of the world, builders started referencing their building dimensions to their "Cornerstone" - which was specially sculpted to contain nothing but true right angles, horizontals and perpendiculars - therefore, their building, when properly referenced to the cornerstone, had to be true, level, and square, with all "horizontals" being truly horizontal, and all "perpendiculars" being truly perpendicular - and when thus referenced, it was materially impossible for the builder and his workmen to err in the construction.* (Nevada Masons, <http://www.nvmasons.org/cornerst.html>)

In addition to its architectural necessity, the words, “square”, “level,” and “true” came to also have moral implications, and in our case spiritual implications. What is the reference point upon which we build our lives – make decisions – and live in relationship with each other? What or who is our cornerstone?

I will return to that question, but first, a bit of trivia. I find it interesting that they can’t seem to locate the real cornerstone of the US Capitol. They have lost it. Interesting to ponder isn’t it?

Anyway....this idea of Jesus as our cornerstone intrigues me. Jesus is our reference point for what is right, or “righteous” to use a biblical term.

We can chuckle or lament about our political leaders losing their cornerstone but what about our churches? You might be surprised at the number of churches that seldom mention Jesus other than to say he died for our sins and saved us. Preachers bang pulpits about homosexuals, end times, hell and damnation, and overlook the actual teachings and example of Jesus. Churches sing praise songs to Jesus but if you actually study his life you will realize that Jesus never set out to be praised. He called us to use his life, and his teaching, and his example as a cornerstone for the living of our lives. He called us to follow him, not worship him, and there is a difference.

This cornerstone is laid when we dedicate our children and promise as parents and church to nurture this child in the ways of Christ. This cornerstone is acknowledged and accepted in baptism as a youth begins to reason and make decisions for him or herself. The cornerstone is there...but so quickly it can be covered up and hidden away – buried under the clutter of our lives. When we lose sight of our cornerstone we become as out of whack as those chief priests and elders.

Several years ago public television aired a British Sitcom that I thought was brilliantly funny called “The Vicar of Dibly.” The main character is a female Episcopal priest, also known as a vicar, serving in a small village. She is single, addicted to chocolate, and has a dimwitted assistant and an equally dimwitted parish council. The actress that plays the vicar is Dawn French and some have called her Britain’s Lucille Ball.

In one episode, the vicar, Geraldine, was wrestling with her own demons. She could do what she knew was right or she could do what she really wanted to do. So she walked over to the picture of Jesus she had hanging on her wall and had a little chat, weighing all the options. Her decision was obvious the moment she reached up, flipped Jesus' picture over, and said something to the effect of "sorry!" and ran out the door.

It's hysterical until you realize that we do the same thing. We flip Jesus' picture and cover up our cornerstone every time we:

- refuse to forgive
- we return violence with violence
- we show concern only for ourselves
- we walk by the oppressed and broken
- we judge
- we exploit others
- we fail to be stewards of our resources
- we refuse to share
- we neglect the poor

The metaphor of the cornerstone was powerful. To identify Jesus as your cornerstone was to say your life, your actions, your words are built on the teachings of Jesus as a reference point. And the teachings of Jesus are not easy – which is why he was and continues to be rejected.

Every week we have a visual and physical reminder of our cornerstone so we won't lose sight of it. We call it the table. We gather around it and we remember. But what we are called to remember is not what Jesus did for us – but what Jesus calls us to do – and who Jesus calls us to be. And in our own strange way we share a symbolic meal where all are welcome, all are fed, and we are one. At the table we catch a glimpse of the kingdom for which we work.

Yet there is one thing about the table that isn't exactly like a cornerstone and that is grace. We may be out of whack, crooked, not on the level and out of plumb, but grace has the power to square us up. We need the cornerstone to know what is true – we need the grace to return to it over and over again.

Today as we celebrate World Communion Sunday and as we boldly promote our CROP walk – we broaden our vision to include our brothers and sisters around the world. We have to do more than just pray for God's kingdom to come. We need to let Jesus set us straight. Amen.