

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay
October 4th, 2020 18th Sunday after Pentecost

207 South Brodie St. Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Words of Welcome

In construction, the cornerstone is a stone that forms the base of a corner of a building, joining two walls. It needs to be firm and in a perfect position as it forms the basis for the rest of the work. In scripture Jesus refers to himself as the cornerstone in a parable that is difficult to get our minds wrapped around. So, let's take a little time to see what we can learn from Jesus words. We begin with a call to worship.

Call to Worship

We come because we want to know God,
who seeks to shape us as faithful people.

**Not that we already are,
but we strive to be the community of grace.**

We come because we want to know Jesus,
who would plant justice deep in our hearts.

**Not that we always do,
but we seek to welcome each person.**

We come because we want to know the Spirit,
who shines hope on all people.

**Not that we always are able,
but we seek to share the light of peace in our world.**

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Hymn

We are God's people

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1. We are God's people, the chosen of the Lord,
born of the Spirit, established by the word;
our cornerstone is Christ alone, and strong in him we stand;
oh let us live transparently,
and walk heart to heart and hand in hand.
2. We are God's loved ones, the bride of Christ our Lord,
for we have known it, the love of God outpoured;
now let us learn how to return the gift of love once given:
oh let us share each joy and care
and live with a zeal that pleases heaven.
3. We are the body of which the Lord is head,
called to obey him, now risen from the dead:

he wills us be a family, diverse yet truly one:
oh let us freely give our gifts,
and so shall God's work on earth be done.

4. We are a temple, the Spirit's dwelling place,
formed in great weakness, a cup to hold God's grace;
alone, we die, for on its own each ember loses fire:
yet joined in one the flame burns on
to give warmth and light, and to inspire.

"We are God's people," words by Bryan Jeffery Leech Music Johannes Brahms
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Opening Prayer

Eternal God,
whose signature we see, if we dare to look, in the creation of the universe,
help us this hour to look and to listen for Your handwriting and Your voice in this
place, among these people.

Connect our temporary praise to Your timeless rhythms,
Your ageless melodies, Your everlasting joyful noise.

Guide us now to focus upon You, knowing that in You,
our distractions become new possibilities for action.

By your Word and the gift of your Spirit, open our minds to greater understanding,
our hearts to deeper love, and our wills for greater service.

Breathe life into our music, our praying, our speaking, our listening, our touching,
that all these activities might become more than they are.

~ adapted from a post on **My Redeemer Lives** website. <http://www.myredeemerlives.com/prayers.html>

Call to Confession

O God, in our worship we reach out to you to give you the burden of our sin, knowing
that you have already enfolded us in your arms.

Prayer of Confession

**God of mercy,
we confess that we have often failed to speak and act with kindness.
We have not always cared for others as you care for us.
We have not welcomed others as we have been welcomed to your table,
nor have we forgiven others as we have been forgiven.
We remember the good not done, kind words not spoken, and things we
regret. Hear our silent confession...**

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Assurance of Pardon

Let us not boast, but simply open ourselves to the grace, the forgiveness, the hope given to us by our God. It is that faith in Christ which restores us to new life, faith beyond anything of any value.

Thanks be to God for this good news. We are loved, we are forgiven. Amen.

Scripture Reading 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.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message The Cornerstone

It is a grim fact that the last group admitted to the Country Club typically becomes the loudest voice in making the case to keep out the next group seeking admission. After all, once you make it to the inside of a Members Only club, you want to savor your new status, see it as a key achievement, a notch in your belt, a feather in your cap, a sign that you are now really Somebody. But if you start to let in just *anyone*—and particularly such-and-such a group—then suddenly your special status starts to feel diminished, watered down, less of a distinction than it had been. The very purpose of having a club is to have a door to shut behind you, to have barriers and walls around you to keep out . . . riff-raff and other undesirables. If you don’t have standards to bar certain people from admission, then what’s the sense of having a club to begin with?

This is human nature, I'm afraid. And it's also the reason that when a religion starts to see itself as a club, it's pretty much game over in terms of reflecting and incarnating the loving heart of God.¹

This was an illustration written by Rev. Scott Hoezee to describe a little of what is going on in the Parable of the Wicked Tenets. I have to say this is one of the most, if not the most, challenging parable told by Jesus. It is what one might refer to as a little hell-fire and brimstone. It is a parable that is also found in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, so there must be something for us to pay attention to if each writer felt that it needed to be included in their accounts of Jesus' ministry in order for us to get a full picture of what it means to be followers of Christ. So, let's try to unpack what is going on here and what it means for us.

Again, this parable comes the day after Jesus had come into Jerusalem on what we now celebrate as Palm Sunday, he has overturned the tables in the temple and on this day, he is teaching in the temple. This is the second story that Jesus is telling the crowd, but also engages the chief priests and the elders. And its not pretty. The conversation stems around, by what authority Jesus is teaching, and it is clear to Jesus that those with power and who have responsibility for helping people learn and experience God have failed miserably. It has become the country club of its time. Keep out the riff raff and rabble rousers, the poor, those who don't quite measure up, those who will diminish the distinguished character of the temple by their presence. Yet Jesus is sitting among those who the authorities would shun. The temple authorities have lost their vision. They are holding on to the history of the faith, the traditions that have made it proud, and given it power, but have lost touch with how God is moving among them in this moment.

This had been the story over and over in the history of the people. They would turn from God, find themselves floundering and without hope, at one point in exile from their land, and God would hear their cries for help, have mercy on them and restore them. But this time God had not just sent prophets to the people to warn and to lead them, this time, God had sent his own son to be flesh and blood like each of us. Still those who should have been able to see what was before them, just didn't get it. It is really hard to let go of what we think we know to be true, to reframe it, and to change course.

This is a violent parable; the degree of violence increases with each person that is sent to collect the produce from the tenants. They beat one, kill another, and stone another, this keeps happening until the son of the landowner is sent. This should have been a moment for pause. Do you really want to kill the son of the landowner? The retribution would be great, but the tenants have become so greedy, so unable to see the depth of their crime, that when the son arrives, they kill him as well.

¹ Hoezee, Scott. https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-22a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel
Accessed October 3, 2020.

Jesus asks them, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (v40) The chief priests and elders themselves give the answer, “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.” (v41)

Now the parable is an allegory, a story that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning. The vineyard is God’s kingdom, and the landowner is God. The first ones sent to get the produce represent the prophets. The son is Jesus, and in their answering the question the temple authorities realize that Jesus is telling this story about them. They are the wicked tenants in the story. Of course, they want to arrest Jesus, but the crowds regarded him as a prophet. They hold off on an arrest, knowing that an arrest could very well lead to a riot.

Straight up this is a parable about judgement, a word we don’t like in our gentle Christian faith, and a word we don’t ever want used when it comes to us as individuals. There is judgement here, plain and simple. If we neglect our responsibilities to the most vulnerable in our midst, and in the world, we are neglecting those that God lovingly created to be equal to you and me. We must understand and even celebrate that their presence does not diminish our worship, our activities, or our well being. In fact, I would emphasize that it is only when we welcome those who struggle, whose lives are broken and bruised, that we truly become the church. Though it makes us uncomfortable when those who are homeless find a home on our steps and have no fear in being there, that is when we more closely resemble the kingdom of God.

When we reach out and give food to the food bank, and offer bus fare to those in need, when we can be comfortable with strangers among us in our worship whether they come in from the cold, or in their Sunday best, when we can all share a seat in the pews, that is when we are more representative of the kingdom of God.

When we read a parable like this one, that provokes repentance for how we have not welcomed, repentance for how our history and tradition has come to be more important than people, and repentance for how we have neglected, even rejected Jesus, then we come a little closer to what Jesus was getting at. This parable was not about damnation, it was about turning to see our sin, asking for forgiveness, and begin to live in the light of what Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit is up to in our midst today.

Which brings me to the interesting reference to the cornerstone that Jesus interjected into the conversation. In Psalm 118:22 we read, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” It continues, “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (vv23-24)

Jesus makes it clear that he is the cornerstone. He is using this Hebrew scripture to declare that he is the one that holds the power and authority. Regardless of what the

world does, the cornerstone is the rock upon which everything is built. It may trip some up, it may crush others, but for those who produce the fruits of the kingdom who tend to the vineyard, Christ the cornerstone will provide stability, and a place to rebuild.

This church has a cornerstone. It was carefully placed when this magnificent building was built. It has structural significance for the actual building, but that cornerstone was always meant to represent Christ and the church. If the cornerstone of the building and then the building becomes more important than Christ and people then we really need to take a step back. It is so easy to become like a country club where when the door shuts, we make it a Members Only club, or like the temple where the chief priests and the pharisees could not see that the Son of God, the one with all the authority was right there in front of them.

Theologian Marvin McMickle writes, “A recently glimpsed bumper sticker says, “The world you desire comes not by chance but by change.” What a difference one letter can make! The world God is attempting to shape through the ministry of the church [and I add by each of us] will not be established by chance or coincidence. It will come only when people change how they live – no longer rejecting the will of the God who made them, but striving to live together in peace.”²

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” May we live in a way that by change the kingdom of God will be here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Closing Prayer

It is our calling and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise, Lord God, Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth. We are in awe as the season turns and the leaves become a blazing array of colour. At times we can see our breath in the air and nature begins its preparations for a winter rest.

We also watch the ways in which your people are living and how decisions unfold to bring either peace or discord in nations and governments, as well as individuals and families.

This day we remember the nations of the world, those who live in fear of their lives either from war, poverty, or hunger, and those who have to bear the greatest burdens borne out the devastating effects of climate change. We think of California where wildfires continue to burn and of Beirut where so many are still dealing with the fallout of the blast. We remember the United States, and prayer for their president, that he and those close to him may become well. We also pray for the U.S. as they approach

² McMickle, Marvin A. Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 4 Season after Pentecost 2. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2010. P145.

an election and ask that each person would be guided by your wisdom and love for people, especially those who particularly vulnerable.

We pray for people world wide as we come into the second wave of Covid. Grant all of us patience and perseverance especially here in Ontario where restrictions have been tightened. We give thanks for scientists and individuals who are working, using all of the wisdom, insight, and gifts you have given them to help find a vaccine. In the meantime, be with those who grieve the loss of loved ones, jobs, relationships, those who are lonely, those who are sad.

We lift up to you the global church, the ministries, and the mission to touch lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ who tended to those who had need not prestige. May the church recognize that you are in our midst, and that you are with those, not only in the church, but outside these walls. We know that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world, may we be mindful of that and be invited into the work that you Lord, are already doing in the kingdom.

We lift to you our silent prayers for the people and situations closest to us...

Giving thanks for your presence among us and in our lives we prayer together...

©Joyce Yanishewski written for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A. October 4, 2020

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

God is generous and gracious. we have received so much from God in Christ and in creation. We offer gifts this day so they might speak of God's love for the world in all its detail, and for people in all their diversity.

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Hymn

The church's one foundation

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| 1. The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ our Lord;
we are his new creation
by water and the word;
from heaven he came and sought us
that we might ever be | 2. Called forth from every nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
our charter of salvation,
one Lord, one faith, one birth,
one holy name professing
and at one table fed, |
|--|--|

his living servant people,
by his own death set free.

to one hope we are pressing,
by Christ's own Spirit led.

3. Though with a scornful wonder
the world sees us oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping;
their cry goes up, "How long?"
But soon the night of weeping
shall be the morn of song.

4. 'Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of our war,
we wait the consummation
of peace forevermore,
till with the vision glorious
our longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.

5. We now on earth have union
with God the Three-in-One,
and share, through faith, communion
with those whose rest is won—
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
like them, the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

Words and music: public domain

Benediction

We will go now, as faithful people, so others might know God.
seeking to invite others into this community of grace.

We will go now, as seeds of justice, so others might know Jesus.
seeking to welcome all who have been rejected by the world.

We will go now, to be lights of hope, so others might know the Spirit.
seeking to illuminate the shadows of brokenness with peace and life.

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