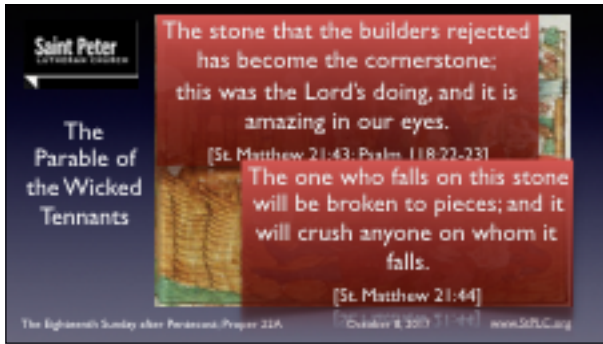


The Parable of the Wicked Tenants is a bloody and disturbing account.
But it tells a number of stories.
It is a history story, dealing with the long battle between prophets and rulers in Israel.
It is a stewardship story, dealing with Jesus' understanding that everything belongs to God.
And most profoundly: it is a story about us.
It has always been a story about us.
The chief priests and Pharisees knew this — that's why they became so angry with Jesus.
The Gospel writers knew this — that's why the story is in our Bible now.
And if we're honest, we know this too — and can feel both challenged and blessed by this story.



I'm not sure the story itself connects well with God's people today.
It is hard to imagine ourselves mistreating or killing God's messengers.
We'd be more likely to ignore them, or pretend they're talking about someone else.
But we think of ourselves as having a fairly open mind about what God has to say, don't we?



3

It's not the story; it's the following conversation that hooks us. The people rightly understand Jesus' point. They are the ones who speak of the vineyard owner's anger and revenge.

Then Jesus offers this quote from the 118th Psalm:
"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes."

He follows it up with a word of warning:

"The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."



4

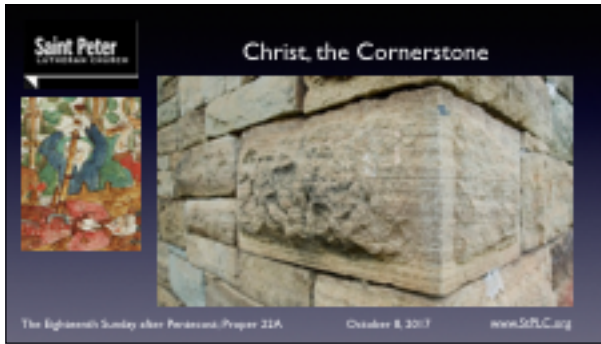
It confronts us with an important question.

When Jesus calls us to a new way of thinking and believing,
How do we respond to what he has to say?

Do we stumble over it because it isn't what we wanted to hear in
the first place?

Or does it become a cornerstone in our lives — something on
which everything else is built?

5



The image of the cornerstone is a helpful one.

I've got an appreciation for cornerstones.

I am intrigued by construction.

When I was in college, I walked by construction sites every day.

Often I would become enthralled with what I saw.

Sometimes I'd stop and watch and lose track of time, and all of a sudden realize my class had already started (or finished!).

I enjoy volunteering at Habit for Humanity.

I've done a good deal of remodeling on our own house.

I know the difference between work that is done well and work that is done poorly.

Sometimes the difference is painfully clear between work done by a professional and work done by someone like me.

When a cornerstone is laid well, it is a work of art.

When it is laid poorly, the building has very little chance of lasting.

6



The thing is: stone masons can be a pretty picky bunch. They spend a great deal of time choosing and shaping key components of a project.

If the rock doesn't seem quite right,

Maybe it is the wrong size or shape or the material isn't strong enough,

The rock will be rejected, and something else will take its place.

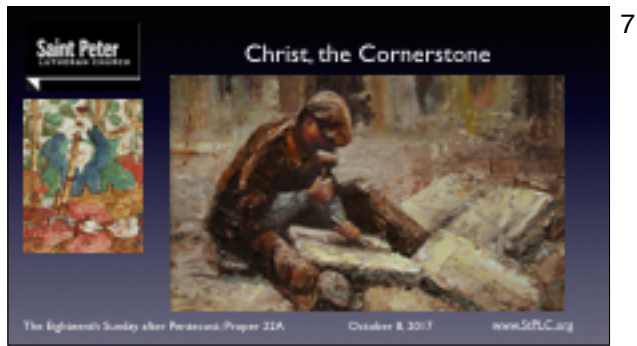
This is what stands at the heart of today's Gospel lesson

Over and over, God spoke to ancient Israel through the prophets.

Time and time again, the people rejected that word as being not quite right for them.

It didn't fit with what they wanted to believe; what they wanted to do; what they wanted to hear.

So they rejected those prophets; often putting them to death.



And now Jesus arrives with a new word from God.
A word that is quite different from what had come before it.
Many, like these chief priests and Pharisees, reject it out of hand.

Opposing this new word of God.
They have something more glamorous in mind.
Something more positive; more inspiring.
Something that will fit better with the life they have imagined for themselves.

Like their ancestors before them, they find themselves offended.

They gather together in their opposition.
They plot for how they'll do away with him.
As they've done away with so many prophets before him.
We can see, here in the 21st chapter, how this story will end.
And we begin to understand what led the religious officials of Jesus's day to oppose him.



But this isn't just a history lesson, is it?
It is a word for us today as well.
Builders may have in mind the perfect fit; or at least an easy fit.
Rejecting stones that don't fill the gap they had in mind.
We do the same in our lives.
We know what kind of belief system fits us.
We want a Lord who supports our values; our perspectives; even our biases.
Perhaps we want a Lord who will make us happier, or more prosperous, or more successful.
A Lord who will help our already pretty good lives to become even better.



Then Jesus comes to us as a crucified Messiah.
 One who calls us to love God wholeheartedly,
 And to love our neighbors as ourselves.

No matter the cost.

He shows us the power of suffering and sacrifice.

Welcoming us into the heart of God.

He invites us to do the same.

He assures us that only this will provide in our lives the kind of
 cornerstone that gives us hope and strength.

And the question is: how will we receive him?

Will he become a stumbling block to us?

Or will he become the cornerstone of our living?



We're going to be talking about this during the next couple of
 months.

Beginning next weekend, actually.

Our Stewardship Team is excited to roll out their campaign for
 2018.

Under the theme "Grounded, Gracious and Generous" we will
 talk about some of the initiatives we have planned for the
 coming year, and invite you to consider the ways you might be
 willing to support them.

The key initiative is to explore together what it means to be
 grounded in faith.



As you'll read in this year's stewardship brochure:
 "Believers need to be grounded in a community that is grounded in Christ. With Christ as our Cornerstone, we can live with strength, stability and hope."
 That's where it all begins for us.
 We do a pretty good job of this with our kids, and we want to strengthen those efforts.
 But we're also excited to talk about how we might do more of this with adults.
 Retreats, workshops, Bible studies, faith partnerships.
 All of these are ways we can work together to allow Christ to be our cornerstone, not our stumbling stone.



God's people have a long history of rejecting the messengers sent to us.
 It isn't easy to follow, especially when our world — even our own desires — draws us in a different direction.
 But today's challenge comes with a promise:
 As we allow the message of Christ to capture our hearts and our living,
 We will experience him as the cornerstone of our lives.
 A source of strength and stability and hope like no other.
 It is God's gift to us.
 And one for which we are deeply grateful this morning.

13



Take It Home!


Let's keep the conversation going. Our hosts will have a 7-day devotional guide for you as you leave today.

Question for this evening's conversation: "When have I experienced Jesus as a stumbling block, and when has he been a cornerstone for my living?"


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So let's keep talking about this. As you leave today, our hosts have a 7-day devotional for you. Let's spend the next couple of days reflecting on this morning, and preparing ourselves for next Sunday.

14



The Last Word




quote
[attribution]

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text

15



Hymn of the Day

Please stand as we sing today's Hymn of the Day.

1st Service: *There in God's Garden* (page #22)

2nd Service: *All to Jesus, I Surrender* (page #30)


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1st Service: There in God's Garden
(page #22)

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(page #30)

16



St. Matthew 21:33-46

21:33 [Jesus said,] "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. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'


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17

Saint Peter
LITURGICAL LEADER

St. Matthew 21:33-46



38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They 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.'

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18

Saint Peter
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St. Matthew 21:33-46



42 Jesus 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?"

43 Therefore 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. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."


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Saint Peter
LITURGICAL LECTURE

St. Matthew 21:33-46



¶ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.
¶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The illustrations are by the Rev. Dr. Robert J. Long, Ph.D., Director of the Department of Liturgical Studies, Saint Peter's College, Jersey City, NJ.

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