

Christ, Our Foundation and Cornerstone

Matthew 21:33-36

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The words of church father, Leo the Great refer to Christ in this way: “He endured previous sorrows even to the point of death. No one could be released from fetters of mortality unless He, in whom alone the nature of all people was innocent, should allow Himself to be killed by the hands of wicked men.”

I concur with Leo’s words as they interpret this passage, the parable of the tenants, within the context of the overarching biblical narrative of Jesus becoming human flesh, dwelling among us, and redeeming us. Essentially, we need a savior. The reality of humanity is that great human suffering does exist for whatever reason, and we need a way to move forward. Jesus joins us in our human suffering and ultimately overcomes all of it. The work has already begun in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and is promised to be complete after his return at the end of history.

In the present moment, it is the role of the church to join with those who are suffering, to bind up the broken-hearted, to free the captives, and give sight to the blind. It is our role to practice good stewardship of God’s resources that we might lead the world in God’s economy of mutual flourishing, which contrasts with the economy of the haves and have nots, and the scarcity of resources that we experience in the economy of empires around the world. It is our role to follow the liturgy of Christ, where we discover that people are made in God’s image, are valuable, and that no one needs to be left on the outside looking in. That contrasts with the liturgy of advertising, that tells us we are inadequate, lacking the latest good or service, and need to better ourselves before God approves of us.

God loves us just as we are and offers us the fullness of grace. In turn, maybe we can do the same for others. Remember our lesson from the last two weeks, that God provides everything for us. All we possess, belongs to God. It is our job to manage it on God’s behalf. God trusts us with it. And like the wicked tenants, God will likely be patient as practice our stewardship, even if we go wrong. For God is extremely patient with us.

The vineyard exists because of the owner’s labor and everything necessary for flourishing has been provided (this is true of the song of the vineyard in Isaiah, as well as the parable in Matthew, not to mention, the reality of present-day circumstances). We see that the owner’s generosity reveals God’s goodness before any judgment appears. Also, God’s judgment never comes without a lot of divine patience. If it were up to me, the wicked tenants and the cruel people in power of our time would get zapped and greasy spots would be left all over the place. We can’t forget, that we need grace just as much as the wicked tenants. That is precisely why I need God’s grace as much as they do. My desire to see the wicked suffer is not much different than the wicked tenants’ cruelty for profit.

We must understand the purpose of parables. Are they moral stories? Are they explaining good vs. evil and right vs. wrong? Sure, but parables compel us to self-reflect. The point is that we need to see ourselves in the parables. We don't get to only see ourselves on the good side of them. What do we have in common with the wicked tenants? How have we contributed to suffering for our own benefit? How do we contribute to the reality of human trafficking? How have we normalized rape-culture on Ivy League University campuses? How do we contribute to minorities being treated as less than human? It is not all about how God has allowed human suffering. It is about how we have allowed wicked tenants to seize control of our land and institutions. We allow Christ to be rejected and crucified with each instance of human suffering at the hands of someone's cruelty.

We promote wicked tenants by what we consume, what we watch, how we vote, and many other daily decisions we might make. Thankfully, there is still hope amidst all the bad around us.

For Christ is our foundation and cornerstone. Christ loves us so much that he not only joins us in our suffering; Christ gives his life for us while we are the wicked tenants. Those who do not stop the cruelty will eventually be crushed by this cornerstone. But first, we have the opportunity for redemption. We can join in God's redemptive work in Christ and invite others too.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Today is a reminder that God raised up our church and the church universal. We are forever connected to people of faith across time and space. We are part of the church with all its disappointments and sins, along with all its goodness and glory. The cornerstone upon which we are built is Jesus Christ, who used his suffering and death to save us all. Christ rose from the dead so we are people of the resurrection. We need not fear death. We can instead, use all of the resources God has provided for us for the mutual flourishing of all. We can find new ways to love our neighbors and even our enemies. With Christ as our center, the church universal can join in the good work of restoring all of creation.

In this restorative work, the faithful who come before us in our tradition and on our land have given us templates. Jubilee culture from the ancient Hebrews teaches us to care for one another at all times, forgive one another's debts, and celebrate widely together. The Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois) who walked this land before us, did something much like Jubilee. They had the Seventh-Generation Principle, that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. The very same idea as God had for Israel in the promised land. That they follow rules to benefit the mutual flourishing of all including your children, and children's children. We cannot get there by connecting with God in isolation and ignoring other people of faith. We need to do this as the church.

As we continue to think about stewardship, what are we doing to benefit our children, and children's children? What can we do now that might benefit the seventh-generation from today? What a challenge indeed. We cannot do this alone. But with Christ as our cornerstone, yes the church universal, can be the vehicle by which Christ's restorative work in the world can be done until he comes again.