

Rebuilding on the Cornerstone
Third in a Series
Matthew 21:33-42
April 25, 2021
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Prayer - Dear God, by your spirit, show us your truth, teach us again your way, and continue to show us what it means to remember, reimagine, and rebuild on you and you alone.

Message

It happened after hurricane Katrina, and after the flood right here in Franklin, and surrounding counties in 2008. It took place following the explosion in Beirut, and the bombing during the Boston marathon. It was necessary after Columbine, Sandy Hook, and 9-11. It takes place following divorce, death, or any number of significant life transitions. Families deal with it when there is trauma, cycles of addiction, or long term illness. Companies and corporations face it any time there is major change or takeover of the industry. It even happens with a job change, moving someplace new, or starting a new routine.

What happens following any one of these situations or circumstances? Rebuilding. A time of finding a way through the rubble and building back what was lost. A moment of finding the strength to keep going when it would be easier to quit. A time of remembering what truly matters and evaluating who you really are as an individual and as a part community and culture. A process of remembering, reimagining, and rebuilding.

The past couple of weeks, we have invited and challenged you to consider what it means, as the people of God, to remember who you are individually and as part of a wider community. We asked you to reimagine what Jesus modeled, taught, and called the church to look and sound like.

We explored questions like; what does it mean to remember all that Jesus taught, stood for and sacrificed? What implications does that have on how we live together as a people, not just subgroups, isolated populations, or pockets of us and them but as a whole?

Today we reflect on what it means to rebuild. We are a year and half into a global pandemic. The entire globe has been impacted by this virus. Things are different than they were a year and half ago. All of us have had to adjust, adapt, and alter schedules, routines, plans, expectations, and how we understand the world. Most of us, if we are honest, lived this last year and half somewhere between faith and fear, confidence and caution, anxiety and relief.

Now it seems we are coming through the other side; slowly, cautiously, moving toward what life used to be like, yet knowing it will never be the same. Now is the time we rebuild; put things back together in a way that reflects the lessons learned, priorities identified, and awareness and wisdom gained over the last year and a half. Now is the time to consider what we do and how we can do it better for God, others, and ourselves.

If this past year has taught us anything as a church, it is that our foundational building blocks here at Grace, are outreach, connection, and

heart. Without those pieces in place, I don't think we would be Grace church. Without those foundational blocks we would not be the church we are.

Our staff has had to dig deep and reflect on who they are, what God has called them to do, and how they do what they do to not only make it work, but make it meaningful within the limitations of the situation. You, as the people of Grace church, whether you know it or not, have had to look at who you are, what matters to you, and where your heart and faith is in the midst of everything that has come our way this year.

Jesus told a story to a group of religious leaders who were testing him, pushing his limits, and trying to catch him in a lie or in making a proclamation that would be considered unlawful. It was a story about a vineyard, a vineyard owner, and the farmhands who were left in charge while the owner was away. I wonder what we might hear and learn from the same story today.

Read text: Matthew 21:33-42

Jesus told a lot of stories. He painted pictures with words, objects, and ideas that the people in his day would understand and relate to. Some of the stories were actual events that took place. Some were a collection of thoughts and illustrations to make a point. Others, like this one recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is an allegory - a story used to symbolize a reality or truth that Jesus was trying to reveal to the listeners without straight up giving them the answer.

Allegory is a powerful storytelling tool used to teach hard truths that not everyone wants or is willing to hear. It is a method that leaves room for the listener to interpret the possible meaning and at the same time there is an underlying truth built in; a hidden message if you will. One of the most famous, contemporary examples of allegory is C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In this case, as recorded in Matthew, the religious leaders are quick to jump to conclusions as what would happen to the greedy farmhands but they fail to recognize (at first anyway) that the story is actually pointing the finger at them - they are the ones who although they believed in God, studied, and lived by the scripture - the OT law, they failed to see the meaning of Jesus' story. They failed to realize they were the greedy selfish farmhands who rejected the servants but also the vineyard owner's son. They should know better.

Jesus uses this story to symbolize God replacing arrogant, selfish religious leaders with his appointed leader (Jesus), who would be the starting point of a new work of God (Isa 28:14–17; Zech 10:3–5): God uses the stone that the builders rejected (Jesus) to begin a new work. Jesus' parable of the tenants depicts how God is beginning a new work by entrusting his kingdom to new "tenants" (Matt 21:42–43). In other words: the vineyard is the nation of Israel - the people of God; the owner is God. The cultivators are the religious leaders. The messengers who were sent are the prophets sent by God and often rejected and killed. The son who came last is, of course, Jesus - the cornerstone.

The cornerstone, sometimes interpreted as the capstone, was considered the most important stone. It was the one stone that held everything else in place. It was the one stone that kept just enough pressure and tension on everything else that the entire structure held together. The cornerstone was often the first stone placed - the foundational corner of the entire structure. It determined the length, height, and width of the structure. The capstone was often the final yet most important piece, without it, the structure would not stand. So either way you look at it, without that stone, nothing would stand. Nothing would last.

It is pretty clear then, that Jesus was and is that stone; the one we are to build our foundation on; the one that determines and defines our meaning and purpose, and the one that holds everything else together. We can have the biggest and best of everything here at Grace, but if we don't model, follow, teach, and preach Jesus, we won't stand; we will fall apart, slowly erode, or collapse. We can have the best ministries, programs, classes, workshops, special events, and guest speakers; be on tv for all that we do, but if we don't begin and end with Jesus, we have nothing.

Church I am not telling you anything you don't already know. I know some of you are sitting there this morning, thinking, "duh, Pastor Jenothy." But here's the thing, we know it, but we rarely live it out fully and completely. We know it but we are afraid of what it might mean if we try something new, different, or outside our comfort zone. We know it but seldom do we do the full on trust fall into the arms of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The text speaks to God's trust in us as the farmhands, workers, and tenants of God's kingdom. It speaks of God's patience with us. It is about service, responsibility, privilege, and accountability. All of which is a part of the rebuilding on the cornerstone of Jesus.

The point of this little post-Easter series is to put before you, the people of God called Grace church, the opportunity to reimagine and rebuild this church on the foundation of Jesus. Not that it isn't already, but to look again, after a year and a half of ups & downs, twists & turns, success & failure, introspection and retrospection, and ask things like:

Who are we - who does God call us to be?

What can worship look like?

Who is the church, really?

Who have we rejected, ignored, or metaphorically put to death?

How do we embrace a hybrid ecology (a both / and existence) - using the old and the new, recognizing us and them, realizing the word "you" in the bible is always plural and communal, NOT singular and individual.

What voices are missing from our conversations?

What people are missing from our table?

How can we love one another better?

What do our people need?

What do we need to surrender or let die that new life might emerge?

How are we the people of God inside and outside the walls of Grace?

I said at the beginning of this sermon that I believe our building blocks here at Grace are: outreach, connection, and heart. The cornerstone of all three has to be Jesus. As we come through the other side of anything;

economic strain, flood, violence, politics, tragedy, uncertainty, and yes, a global pandemic, we can do nothing less than remember who we are in Christ, reimagine what church can and should look like, and rebuild on the model, example, and teaching of Jesus.

Church, let's remember and live like we mean it. Let's reimagine and trust God's leading. Let's rebuild and see what the Holy Spirit can do.

I know it can be scary. Maybe that's how we know it matters.

Amen.