

THE CORNERSTONE

Luke 20:9-20

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

April 6, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 20, verses 9 through 20. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 20, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

⁹ And he began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Surely not!” ¹⁷ But he looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written:

“ ‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone’?”

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

¹⁹ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the cornerstone. What does this mean? There are two ways we can think of this as Christians. One, we can think of him as the cornerstone of our lives.

In old times, the cornerstone was the first stone a builder would lay. Today we usually pour a concrete foundation, so we can make it square, theoretically, anyway. In old times, they started the foundation with a cornerstone. A builder could lay out the lines first, and then he would find the best and squarest stone in the pile to set at the corner. Then a good builder could fit all the other stones into their places like a natural puzzle. But the cornerstone was the one that helped to line up the rest of the building. It set the shape. So what do you have that sets the shape of your life?

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To our young people, by the emphasis that grownups place on certain things, they might think their athletic ability or their education will be the cornerstone of their lives. And these things are good, but not good enough to be the cornerstone.

As adults, very few of us think of our athletic ability as the cornerstone. But it could be our health, our careers, our bank accounts, or our marriages. And all these things are good. Of these things, our marriages are the closest thing to a decent cornerstone. But even that isn't quite good enough. The wise man built his house on the rock (Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49). And the rock is Jesus Christ.

The second way we can think of Jesus as the cornerstone is that he is the cornerstone of the Church. And this is the way Jesus means it in this parable. Jesus identifies himself as the cornerstone, and the building is the Church, the whole people of God. It's the house of living stones (1 Peter 2:5) that God is building. We are stones in this house. Jesus is the cornerstone. He is the first stone laid, and he sets the shape for the rest of the building.

These are the two ways of thinking of Jesus as the cornerstone. In the first way, we think of him as part of our lives. And that's not wrong, so long as we recognize what part of our lives he is. He's not just one part among many, but he is the cornerstone. And every other part of our lives should be intentionally crafted to fit with him as the cornerstone.

But the second way is even greater still. Instead of thinking of him as part of our life, we see our lives as part of him. He is the cornerstone, and you are a stone, I am a stone. And the Holy Spirit is building us together into a house of living stones, with Christ as the cornerstone.

The surprising thing about this cornerstone is that he was rejected by the builders, or, at least, by those who thought of themselves as builders. But the Father picked him out of the reject pile and set him as the cornerstone. That's what Jesus uses this parable to teach.

I've mentioned before that this is my favorite parable. And that might reveal something about my personality, because this parable is extremely dark. But as I consider this parable, its meaning and its place in the gospels, there are reasons to think of it as the most important of all of Jesus' parables. Many people would say the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, which we considered last week, would be their favorites. And that's okay for those to be your favorites. Your favorite can be whichever one you want. But without taking anything away from any other parable, this one about the vineyard has a greatest place in the life of Jesus and in the gospels. I'll explain what I mean.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the gospels with parables. John doesn't really have them. But in those three gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there are only two full-length parables that appear in all three. There are a few shorter, sort-of parables of only one or two verses that appear in all three. But the parables of the sower and the vineyard are the only feature-length parables to appear in all three. The parable of the sower has often been called the "queen" of the parables. That's because it's the first one, and it defines what a parable is and why Jesus uses them. You can't really tell any parables without first telling the parable of the sower. There Jesus teaches that he uses parables to hide things from the wise, or those who think themselves wise, and reveal things to his children, who seek truth from him (8:10; 10:21). To those who want to learn from Jesus, the parables teach us. But to those who don't think they have anything to learn from Jesus, his parables seem like the absurd rambling of a crazy man. For example, those who heard the parable of the vineyard said, "Surely not!" (20:16). They thought it was ridiculous.

And if the parable of the sower is the "queen," the parable of the vineyard might be the "king" of all parables. Besides appearing in all three synoptic gospels, it's the last parable in all

but Matthew. And of all the parables, it's the one that most clearly reveals the death and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, as the events of holy week unfold in Jerusalem, it's the parable that inspires the scribes and priests to plot against Jesus, arrest him, and have him put to death. And this is really interesting. I'm not sure if "ironic" is the right word or if it's the opposite of ironic. But the telling of this parable has the effect of bringing about its own fulfillment. It predicts that the scribes and priests will kill the Son of God, so they do.

I've been thinking about Jesus' parables, the similarities and differences among them. Perhaps you have noticed that many of Jesus' parables do not have happy endings. The Good Samaritan does. The parable of the sower does, though not everything in the middle is happy. The unforgiving servant has a really sad ending, despite the way it teaches the gracious forgiveness of God. The workers in the vineyard has a sad ending, despite the master's generosity. Even the Prodigal Son, which we heard last week, seems like it will end well, and it does for the one brother, but it's open-ended for the other brother. It's really up to the scribes and Pharisees how it will end. You might remember this from last week: the older brother represents the scribes and Pharisees, and the father goes out to plead with the older brother to celebrate the return of his younger brother. But Jesus ends the parable without saying what the older brother did. It's up to the scribes and Pharisees to write the ending. Will they rejoice that tax collectors and sinners have been brought back to Jesus in repentance, or will they reject them and Jesus with them? Jesus leaves it open-ended.

This parable of the vineyard kind of serves as the conclusion of the Prodigal Son. It's here that we get the answer to the open ending, and the answer is "no." They will not accept the tax collectors and sinners. They will continue to grumble about Jesus' forgiveness of them. And they will not accept Jesus. Instead, they will kill him. If Jesus were to continue the parable of the Prodigal Son all the way to the end, instead of staying outside the house or going away, the older brother would eventually murder his father.

But instead of continuing the Prodigal Son, Jesus uses the parable of the vineyard to describe the circumstances of his death.

The interpretation of the parable is fairly simple.

The man is God, more specifically, God the Father. He is the owner of the vineyard.

The vineyard is Israel. Even if we couldn't figure that out on our own, the parable resembles an Old Testament parable from Isaiah 5, where the relationship between God and Israel is compared to the struggles of a man with his vineyard.

The tenants—the literal word for them is "farmers"—are the leaders of the Jews. Jesus is especially pointing his arrows at the scribes and chief priests. And we see in verse 19 that they understood this. But this wasn't a new problem. It had been going on, off and on, for several hundred years. It was a pattern of disobedience going back over a thousand years.

And so the servants of the master are the prophets. We don't have to identify them with any specific prophets, because there was a general pattern of rejecting the prophets and treating them shamefully. We think of prophets like Elijah, who had to flee for his life from the king and queen. A few weeks ago we considered Jeremiah, who was persecuted and thrown into a cistern by the priests. Or we think of John the Baptist, who, during Jesus' ministry, was arrested and beheaded at the orders of King Herod. These are just a few examples of how the leaders of Israel treated the prophets. They're represented by the servants in this parable, who, when sent to collect the owner's share of the profits, are progressively treated worse and worse. The first is

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sent away empty handed. The second is treated shamefully and beaten. The third is wounded and cast out. Luke actually censors the violence a bit. In both Matthew and Mark, the way they tell the parable, multiple servants are killed by the tenants.

Then we get to the son, who is obviously Jesus, the Son of God. And we want to notice the timing. Jesus told this parable during holy week. The day was probably Monday or Tuesday, so this is just three or four days before Good Friday, when these same exact scribes and chief priests demanded that Pilate have Jesus crucified. That's the central event this is leading up to.

And the last people to identify are the "others" whom the man gives the vineyard to after he destroys the wicked tenants. These would be the apostles and, after them, all who would believe in Christ through their testimony. It starts with the twelve disciples, whom Jesus had been teaching. Upon Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he entrusts them with the ministry of the gospel, so that many others will become heirs of the kingdom. And then it extends through history down to you and me. All who receive the Son and believe in Jesus are the "others" to whom the vineyard is given.

This is certainly one of those parables that people found completely absurd. At the end, the people say, "Surely not!" What are they objecting to? Matthew records that at the end of the parable, Jesus actually turns to the people and asks them what the owner will do, and they reply, "He will but those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons" (21:41). So, as Luke records it, the people are not objecting to the owner's action at the end of the parable. It's the first sane thing he does in the whole story. Rather, they are objecting to the whole parable. They object to Jesus' insinuation that Israel has always persecuted the prophets. They object to the notion that they would kill the Son of God. And they certainly object to Jesus' implication that he is that Son of God. The whole thing is nonsense to them.

The whole parable is absurd. No one in it behaves the way a rational person would. On the side of the tenants, no sane tenant thinks they can just keep all the profits for themselves without paying their landlord. Nor would they think they can beat or kill his servants and get away with it. Worst of all is thinking they can murder his son and become the heirs. That's just not how it works. But this is how Jesus characterizes the scribes and priests. And they, at least, understand that he told this parable against them (20:19). Everyone thinks it's absurd. But all they have to do in order to prove Jesus wrong is not kill him.

On the side of the owner, it seems even more absurd. After one of your servants is beaten and sent back empty handed, it would be prudent to get the authorities involved and evict the tenants. They are obviously not the kind of people you want to work with going forward. And the last thing you should do is send your beloved son. Nor should you expect them to respect him. Clearly, they will not. To Jesus' opponents, and to the skeptics, this sounds like the silliest story ever told.

But this is the story of Jesus, and it was God's plan all along.

Jesus shifts metaphors at the end, from a vineyard to a building. And the Son, who is cast out of the vineyard and murdered is the cornerstone.

**"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone"** (20:17; Ps. 118:22).

This cornerstone is Jesus. We have a picture of his crucifixion in the parable of the vineyard. A few days after this parable, Jesus was led outside the city of Jerusalem, like the son was thrown

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out of the vineyard, and he was crucified to death. And we have a picture of his resurrection in being set as the cornerstone. He was rejected by the so-called builders, but God reached down into death, pulled his Son out, and set him as the cornerstone.

Now where do you fit in this parable? I hope you are not one who rejects the Word of God when it comes to you, as the leaders of Israel did. Nor that you would ultimately reject the Son of God. The parables often serve as warnings to us. The priests and scribes, along with others who rejected Jesus, did not think there was anything wrong with themselves, so they did not heed Jesus' warning. Thinking you are okay does not make it true.

Rather, we should see ourselves as the "others," to whom the vineyard is given, or as the stones that are built into the house that God builds, with Jesus as the cornerstone. At the end of the parable, the owner gives the vineyard to "others." And there's a subtle point of grace here. He does not lease it to "others." He does not look for new tenants; he looks for new heirs. And this is how God the Father sees you through Jesus. You are not tenants. You are not mere servants. But through the death and resurrection of Jesus, you are children and heirs.

And in the metaphor of the building, after laying the cornerstone, God continues to build his Church. He takes you, as a living stone, and places you into his building. And in this way, we should see Jesus as our cornerstone. He is the foundation, upon which our lives are built. But, even more than that, we are built into him. We become stones in his house. Here we have the greatest security, not as individuals, out in the world, trying to make it through with Jesus' help, but as stones built into his one eternal house. His Church will stand, and we will stand in him. Jesus is your cornerstone. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.