

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The First Sunday after Las Vegas
October 8, 2017
Text: Phil. 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46
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In today's Gospel, we heard Jesus quoting from the 118th psalm, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes." Not being an architect, I turned to that fount of knowledge, Wikipedia, to shed more light on cornerstones.

A cornerstone is also known as the foundation stone or setting stone. It is the first stone to be set in the construction of a masonry foundation. The position, solidity, and soundness of an entire structure rests on the cornerstone. Cornerstones are of enormous importance since all other stones will be set in reference to them. These days, laying a cornerstone is a more ceremonial component of a building, something to write the date on, or put a time capsule under, but its original purpose was essential. Without a proper cornerstone the building would never be right.

Jesus used the metaphor of the cornerstone as the foundation of one's right relationship to God and all creation. He admonished the leaders of the people who had lost sight of that foundation and were acting as though they owed nothing to God. They had allowed the power and resources at their disposal to warp their perspective and pervert their estimation of their place in society. They thought they were not only entitled to everything that had been placed in their care, they wanted more and wanted it all for themselves. Jesus called them out in the parable of the wicked tenants; exposing their greed, callousness, and violence towards those who sought to correct them. Jesus warned them about that cornerstone, saying, "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

Paul of Tarsus found out about the true cornerstone of faith in his encounter with Jesus. When he was still known as Saul, he was more than satisfied with himself. After all; he was from the tribe of Benjamin- the tribe that produced significant leaders. And he was a Pharisee- the sect that prided itself on its rigorous interpretation of the law. Paul considered himself blameless under the law: he had followed every commandment since the time of his circumcision- right on schedule on the eighth day of his life. He felt that his zeal and fervor for his religion could not be surpassed by anyone.

But when he stumbled into Jesus, Paul's image of himself was shattered. Looking at the reflection of his life that he saw in Christ, he saw that it was rubbish, built on false premises and empty of true righteousness.

We have been shattered this week by the violence of a gun man in Las Vegas who opened fire with military style weapons on a crowd of concert goers, leaving behind 58 dead and 489 wounded. We are devastated by the enormity of the loss of life and the trauma inflicted upon all who were there, all the first responders, and all who grieve for their loved ones. And we are crushed and discouraged, because in the horror of this event, we can see reflected our failure to protect and care for one another. Any illusions we may have had about our righteousness or superiority among the nations have been broken to pieces, as even conversation about gun control is once again being silenced. One pundit went as far as to say that mass shootings are the 'price of freedom.'

Events like this are bringing us face to face with the consequences of the materialism, individualism, and cut-throat competition upon which so much of our society is built. We have in place a cornerstone that is compromising our very lives. If violence is the cost of continuing with the way things have always been, we need to ask ourselves, "Is this what God intended for us? Is this the way we want to live?"

Paul confronted these questions in his own life, and determined that he needed a new foundation. He realized that following the letter of the law was not enough; he needed the law to be written on his heart. He wanted to be transformed by Christ and obtain the righteousness- that is, the right perspective of life- that comes from God. Paul's life was changed completely after his encounter with Jesus. He learned from the disciples he once persecuted. He preached and taught at great risk to himself; and wrote letters of encouragement from prison to those he had disciple in the faith.

We need this kind of conversion today. We need to be healed of our violence. We need to rebuild on a more secure foundation -and I'm not recommending a theocracy and religious law- no, this conversion must begin with ourselves. It is time to lay down a solid cornerstone for our lives upon which a new future can be built; a future where we love God and our neighbor as ourselves. A future in which the resources that God has given are shared, replenished, and cared for in a sustainable way, so that the generations to come will have the things they need. This is the future promised through the prophet Isaiah, "No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise."

The cornerstone and foundation of Jesus is the beginning of the kingdom of God, the beloved community of God. It is Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace who can save us and heal us of this madness. Let us turn to God in prayer and ask -no, beg- for the love of Christ to be planted firmly in our hearts that we might be guided to right living all our days. Amen.