

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
St. Luke 20:9-20

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In addition to last week's parable, Jesus told another parable involving inheritance. A man owns a vineyard, leases it to some tenants, and goes off to a far country. The time comes for the harvest, and the owner sends some servants to collect payment. It's only fair—it's his land that they are farming, he's owed payment for its use. Three times a servant is sent to the tenants; three times the tenants beat the servant and send him back empty-handed. Then, the owner sends his son—his beloved son—figuring that he would receive more respect than his servants. On the contrary, the son is beaten and killed. They figure they will get the land if the son is killed.

How ridiculous! Thinking that killing the land owner's son will net them the land? But, that's how Jesus told it: They beat the servants, kill the son, and refuse to pay the rent but expect to get the owner's land. The land owner has every right to go in there and raze the land and slaughter the tenants.

Thus, Jesus said, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." His hearers scoffed at this idea.

This is a pretty familiar parable, though not as much as last week's parable. I would guess that most of you are familiar enough with it that you could recognize who the people in the parable are supposed to represent. The owner is God the Father, the servants are His prophets, the son is the Son, the vineyard is the people of God, and the tenants are the Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

Jesus' hearers recognized what the parable was teaching, too. St. Luke wrote, "[T]hey perceived that he had told this parable against them..." Hence their response after the parable. God destroying the tenants and giving the vineyard to others doesn't sit well with their picture of a god who is pleased with them for their works. It doesn't sit well with them that they are going to be cast out of the vineyard—that is, out of God's grace.

It's a response similar to what you could hear today. This picture of a vengeful God doesn't sit well with a populous that wants to view God only as permissively loving, overlooking and accepting of their sins and faults, even calling them good and right! This picture of a vengeful God doesn't sit well with people today who think of themselves as pretty good people, who think that God must always love, approve of, and affirm them and will bring them into heaven (sounds much like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law).

But this is God's Law, proclaimed by God's Gospel manifest. Man's good works don't count for squat before God. Hoping in your good works is to put your faith in something other than God and His Son, it is to put faith in yourself. It's not trusting in God and His Son, and the wages of this misplaced trust is to be cast out of the vineyard.

There was this thought, and it still exists, that, as it is told in the parable, if the tenants get rid of the son, it proves them right. So, the Pharisees sought to get rid of the Son of God; He was a walking, talking example against their religion; so, if they could kill Him and get Him out of the picture, then that would confirm for them (and for others) that their religion and their picture of God was the right one. It still goes on today as people these days try to prove by faulty science and biased headlines that God does not exist, such that when what they say makes sense, it confirms for them (and they hope for others) that their religion (yes, religion) and idea of the non-existence of God is the right one.

And their arguments are swaying. Given the evidence, both fabricated and actual, the theory of evolution can look plausible. It gets to the point that there are people out there, calling themselves

Christian, who hold to a teaching called theistic evolution—that God works on his creation via macro-evolution. They also argue that in the Bible God is visibly active—His voice is heard, He appears in visions, and there are many supernatural events such as water changed to blood, a bush that burns but is not consumed—but in these days, God, if He exists, is hidden and inactive. Therefore, since today's experience of God differs from the accounts in the Bible, the Bible must be false and God doesn't exist.

However, killing the son doesn't get rid of him. The owner of the vineyard still had his way. God still has His way—the only-begotten Son is killed, but He is raised to life again. God does not work through macro-evolution—He created all that you see or that from which is made all that you see in six days. He is still very active today, working through simple, ordinary means: word, water, bread, wine, mouth and hands of a man...creating and sustaining faith.

Now, it would be easy to end the sermon there; early, just like last week. However, I would have failed you as your pastor and teacher if we didn't look at what Jesus says next: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

It bears repeating: the Son will be killed—He is the stone that the builders rejected—but He will be raised to life again—and by His death He will claim for Himself a Church, become Her cornerstone. She is built on Him and Him only. The scriptures also call the prophets and apostles the foundation—they spoke of and wrote about the Cornerstone so that through them is laid the foundation of the faith upon which believers are built as living stones of a spiritual house.

Therefore, Jesus says, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." Jesus is speaking of you, dear hearers. Jesus is speaking of everyone when He says this.

On whomever it falls, it will crush him. I want to examine the second part first because, quite frankly, it is nothing but Law and judgment. St. Paul calls Jesus and His crucifixion a stumbling block. "[W]e preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles..." (1 Corinthians 1:23)

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." (Romans 9:30-33)

On those who stumble over Him, who deny Him and His Word, who are not built into the Church, He falls as the Cornerstone. He comes down in judgment on them who reject Him.

Who are these people? Most simply, those who place their trust in another god. These are people who might pray to an idol or even trust in their own works. More difficultly, those who say they believe in Jesus but reject His Word. These people have created for themselves another Jesus who is not proclaimed by that foundation of the prophets and apostles and is really no Jesus at all. There are those who will "pretend to be sincere," but inwardly have no faith at all. These are people who would "go along" just to "fit in," who attend church to make mom and dad or a husband or wife happy, say the prayers with everyone and put on a show of having faith, when truthfully they have none. Finally, there are those who are on the membership rolls of a Christian Church, but willfully separate themselves from Him, His Word, and His Sacraments. These are people who have their baptismal certificates, but stuff them away in a sock drawer and forget about them. Worshiping a false god, creating a false Jesus, not worshiping in spirit and in truth, and turning away from forgiveness are the sure and certain ways of stumbling over Jesus. On them, the the chief cornerstone falls, crushing them...

...Unless they fall on Him.

“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces...” As was mentioned, the Church is built upon that Stone. As living stones, believers are built upon Him; they, in essence, fall on Him. And when they fall on Him, when you fall on Him, you are broken to pieces.

Notice all of the passive tenses there, too. Believers do not actively jump onto the Cornerstone. They do not thrust themselves down onto Him and dash themselves to pieces. On the contrary, by the work of the Word and Holy Spirit, they fall onto Him by the power of God’s Law and are broken.

Now, this isn’t the judgment that you may be hearing it as. Recall that St. Paul quoted Isaiah, “[W]hoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” As Dr. Arthur Just wrote, “Those who believe in him...must fall into the brokenness of repentance...” When you fall onto Christ the Cornerstone, you break apart and reveal your lives of sin. Your inner parts are strewn about and revealed. You can no longer hide your sins, but by God’s Law can only confess them in contrition. “Those who believe in him...must fall into the brokenness of repentance,” Dr. Just wrote, “in order to be raised again as new beings, living stones in Christ, the temple of God.”

There is no shame for those who fall on Him and are brought to brokenness of repentance because in Christ the Cornerstone they are raised again forgiven, restored, renewed. The filthiness of that sin in your inner parts that was exposed when you were and are broken was taken from you by the Cornerstone and crucified with Him; He was taken down from the cross, but your sins died eternally there. That filthiness has been washed clean, as signified by the saving flood of Baptism, and continues to be washed clean when God is active to you in the simple means of word, water, bread, wine, and the mouth and hands of a man.

Again, this is all happening to you passively, without any action on your part. You are broken and you are renewed. The Word is spoken to you to show you your sin, and the Word is spoken to you to give you your Savior. You fall on the Cornerstone and are broken and are “raised again as new beings, living stones in Christ, the temple of God.”

Christ is your Cornerstone, “[A] stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24) God sent His Son to the vineyard and He was killed—died for you and made you part of His Church for Himself. Therefore, since Christ is your Cornerstone, since Christ is the power of God to you and the wisdom of God for you, since Christ went to the vineyard and died for you, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen