

4.3.22

On August 5 of the year 70, a sacrifice was made in the Temple in Jerusalem for the final time in history. After four years of brutal siege warfare against the Roman empire, Jerusalem had simply run out of anything to sacrifice, because there was no food left. The Romans entered Jerusalem and the Temple, and they did what conquering armies do. After taking everything they could from the city, including the remaining residents of Jerusalem, the Romans deforested everything within an 11 mile radius of the city, and threw salt in the ground so that nothing would grow around the city for centuries. Jews would not worship in any form in Jerusalem until the reign of the Emperor Constantine several hundred years later, who would allow them to visit the city once a year to weep at the wailing wall. Judaism and Christianity would never again be the same after the destruction of this Temple.

Jesus tells the parable of the “wicked tenants” in St. Luke’s Gospel this morning in preparation for precisely this event, the destruction of the Temple, and the conclusion of Israel’s sacrificial worship. Even before the destruction of the Temple took place, the Christians who lived in Jerusalem, who did not yet distinguish themselves from other Jews, left the city of Jerusalem because they had stopped sacrificing in the Temple. Christians did not even fight to protect Jerusalem or the Temple, which is one reason for the intense hatred that arose between Jews and Christians.

The Christians in Jerusalem had fled to the mountains outside of the city at the first hint of war, first because that early Christian community was committed to pacifism, but more importantly because they no longer believed that Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem were worth fighting for. In spite of centuries of tradition, it was clear to Jewish Christians from the teachings of Jesus like this parable, and from his death and resurrection, that God had done

something so radically new in Jesus Christ that the Temple was no longer the place where human beings met God.

Christians in Jerusalem believed that this change happened before the destruction of the Temple, because it happened at the destruction of Jesus' body on the cross. The Temple was no longer the place where reconciliation between God and humanity, or atonement for the sins of humanity, took place. The very person of Jesus Christ was where God and humanity were literally joined together. The very person of Jesus Christ was where atonement for the sins of humanity was made to God. Jesus Christ was the Temple. While looking into the historical and theological context of the parable of the wicked tenants might seem a bit tedious, it is incredibly helpful for filling out the picture that Jesus presents of what God is doing in the final days before his death on the cross. At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus speaks of a "stone that the builders rejected" that "has become the chief cornerstone." Jesus is that cornerstone, and his rejection literally becomes the foundation for our life with God, because Jesus himself is the Temple.

Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard. The vineyard is leased out to tenants while the owner is away in another land for a long time, so, naturally, the owner sends representatives to collect what is owed him, the fruit of the vineyard. Each and every time, those servants he sends to collect the fruit are beaten, and treated shamefully. Each successive representative is treated worse, until the owner finally decides to send his own son, the heir, to represent him, in hopes that the tenants will respect the son. The tenants' minds have become so distorted that they see the arrival of the son, not as an opportunity to finally get right with the vineyard owner and give him his due, but as their great opportunity to rob what belongs to the vineyard owner. They kill the son.

Some of Jesus' parables are difficult because they are perplexing, and their meaning is hard to penetrate. This is not one of those parables. The crowds, the chief priests, and scribes are not left scratching their heads at Jesus' teaching. Jesus has told in a one paragraph parable the entire history of Israel. Her rejection of the prophets, and finally her rejection of God's very son, who Jesus claims to be. There is no head scratching, for the hearers of this parable are simply trying to pick their jaws up off the floor. The question they ask among themselves is not, "what did he just say," but "did he really say what it sounds like he said, and what are we going to do about it?" The answer to that question is somewhat ironic, because it is precisely at this moment in Luke's Gospel when the Temple leadership makes the decision to kill Jesus, fulfilling the very prophecy that causes so much offense and makes them want to kill him in the first place. Their perception that Jesus had "told this parable against them" was completely correct, and in spite of and because of their best efforts they fulfill the parable, and are determined to kill Jesus of Nazareth.

There are many places in Scripture where God's people and the Temple in particular, are depicted with the imagery of a vineyard, which explains the knee-jerk reaction of the Temple leadership. The image is always used to call out Israel's leadership for their unfaithfulness, and to promise the destruction of the Temple and exile of God's people. Israel is supposed to produce good grapes and abundant wine, a common image for salvation, but instead Israel produces sour grapes, much like the sour drink that Jesus is offered on the cross. This imagery always accompanies God's promise to create conditions for good wine by allowing enemies to trample the grapes, take over the vineyard, and send the tenants into exile. This imagery is always used to anticipate the destruction of the Temple.

Knowing precisely what Jesus is saying about them and about the Temple in Jerusalem, the chief priests and scribes respond to Jesus in astonishment, “surely not!” But Jesus looks directly at them and asks, “what then is this that is written: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?’ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” The rejection of Jesus by the builders will become the cornerstone, or the foundation, of the new Temple and the new Israel that God is building up once again, with Christ as the head. God’s plan for the redemption of all the world is not going to stop simply because his people stand in the way of those plans. Not even Priests can stop God. In fact, the very rejection of God in Jesus becomes the basis, the foundation, the cornerstone for a new life with God for all people. Any rational person knows that a rejection is a rejection. Our “no” to God means “no.” But Jesus reminds us that even our “no,” to God becomes God’s “yes” to us.

That God takes his own people’s rejection of him, both in this parable and each and every day of existence, and turns it into the foundation of a life with him is astounding, it is a profound truth. God can do anything with anything. If this were not true, there is no way the Church would exist, and somehow still be growing, 2000 years after Jesus taught this parable. God can do anything with anything. This does not mean that we pursue or permit wickedness and evil to persist and flourish, nor should it cause us to minimize the awful consequences of evil in our world. It is simply to say that God does not allow those things to ever have the final word. God can use wickedness and evil to accomplish his own purposes, because he will not allow them to have the final word. God can use the death of his son sent to the world to love it, and use that rejection to save it. We stumble over Jesus, and in that way he becomes the foundation and cornerstone for life with God.

When I hear these themes from our readings this morning, I cannot help but think of the German “Stolperstein,” movement that began in 1992. “Stolperstein,” means “stumbling stone” in German. One of the great tragedies and injustices of the Nazi years is that many of the homes, houses of worship, and places of business that were stolen from Jews still remain in the hands of the very families who they were awarded to by Nazi leadership, usually in return for loyalty to the party. That is an open secret in German and Austrian society, much more comfortable to ignore than to talk about or think about openly.

In 1992, the German artist Gunter Deming came up with the idea of placing memorial bricks in the streets and sidewalks in front of the homes and businesses that were stolen from Jews, or other enemies of the Nazi regime, with the permission of those who now inhabit those places. The bricks brightly bear the names of the people who lived, worked, or worshiped in those spaces before they were stolen from them, saying “here lived,” or “here worked,” along with their names, and the date of their birth and death. It is surprising to see the extent to which the Stolperstein movement has taken off, it is now impossible to go to most Europe that were once occupied by Nazis without finding these stones. It is a courageous thing for homeowners and shop owners to allow these stumbling stones to be placed, but allow it they do, for they do not want ever not to stumble over the past evil that has been done in their country.

One fall I was invited to visit several Stolperstein installations in a German town on the Western border with Belgium in front of the childhood home, family business, and synagogue of the woman who led the tour, one of my former parishioners, who lost her family in the Holocaust. The synagogue was destroyed in the 1930’s, replaced by an auto body shop that is still there. Her home is inhabited by descendants of the family who took it from them, and the business occupied by another business. She and her husband, an Anglican Priest, made it their

ministry to live near her hometown once again for part of the year in the 1990's. Part of the ministry for many years was leading a public, liturgical tour of the stumbling stones in the village. The children and grandchildren of those who actively murdered, or passively permitted the murder, of Jews in that village stumble over the truth of what they have done in prayer and lamentation, and receive forgiveness alongside the very people whom they victimized.

The Church in Germany has not wasted the opportunity of the Stolperstein movement to speak of Jesus Christ in a nation that does not really want to hear anything about Jesus. The Stolperstein are an exception, and I hope that American Christians can adopt a similar practice of truth telling about our past in hopes that we will find an opportunity to speak of Jesus Christ, for we all have stumbling stones. When people ask how this powerful truth telling is possible on the other end of so much suffering, the answer is simply that the God we know in Jesus Christ is a God who can do anything with anything. "Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy," because God can do anything with anything, and God always has the final word.

This morning, we live in a world that is still overcome with inexplicable evil, darkness, and suffering. We are facing the decay of our bodies in old age. We are suffering from the choices of our children, our spouses, or others we love who have hurt us. We have cancer. We have bodily ailments that will not go away until we die. We have a history of a lot of hurt and wounding in our churches. We have memories and recollections of things we have done that make life with ourselves feel impossible. We lead lives riddled with hypocrisies. We can be honest about this, because God can do anything with anything. God can do anything with anything, and God will have the final word always.

Next Sunday marks the beginning of a Holy Week, when we will stand in the place of the wicked tenants and murder the son. We will kill God. In a dialogue written hundreds of years

before Jesus came and dwelt among us, Socrates was asked what human beings would do if the perfect man came and lived among them. The answer of this pagan philosopher continues to stun Christians. Socrates' response was, "I suppose he would be crucified." We will soon find that Socrates was right, and that we are this perfect man's executioners. If we will get anything out of Holy Week, we must begin by telling the truth about ourselves, because that is who we are. We are God's executioners. We are the ones who stumble over the stumbling stone, and are broken to pieces.

That will not stop God, it never has and it never will. God's purposes for us are good, so good that he can use even our rejection of him to accomplish his own purposes. God's purposes are good, his way is love, and our own hatred for the gracious love of God becomes the basis for receiving it. The death of God becomes the means to a life with God. When we had life with him, flesh and blood life with him, we responded by killing him. He responds by giving us his life. Amen.