

sermon-10/5/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Our True Cornerstone”  
Matt. 21:33-46  
By Jim Patton

This is a great day in the life of Newport. Inspiring music, celebrating World-wide Communion Sunday, seeing old friends again, recognizing the hard work, skilled craftsmanship and artistic design of some of our members, all have made this a very festive time. Giving thanks for all the generous gifts that have made this worship space possible is so very appropriate.

At the same time, this kind of service provides us with the opportunity to reaffirm our foundational beliefs, our cornerstone as it were, as we begin this new era in Newport Church’s worship life. All that has gone before has led us to this moment. If we are to move forward faithfully, we need to take a moment to remember the foundation upon which we build a future.

The ultimate foundation, of course, is Christ. As our scripture passage out of Matthew’s gospel makes plain, Christ is the foundation, the cornerstone. Sadly, the religious leaders in his day rejected that foundation. While it is important to affirm Christ as our foundation, we need to dig deeper to understand what demands such an affirmation places on us.

Looking deeper, we see that Jesus’ parable of the bad tenants brings the issue of stewardship front and center. No doubt we have all heard countless sermons on stewardship in the past. We are quickly entering the stewardship season in our church calendar. My guess would be most of us could articulate what it means to be a steward of God’s good creation. I would also guess that most of us live as if we finally don’t buy it.

What I mean is we live as if what we have is ours. We have worked hard for it. We have earned it. We ought to be able to use what we own as we see fit. God may ultimately be the owner but when it comes to the day to day decisions, we act as if what we have is ours and ours alone.

The parable of the bad tenants challenges such thinking. It says we are only tenants. God is the owner. Our job is to be stewards of God’s creation and stewards over whatever treasure may be in our possession. We are to treat what we have as God would treat it.

The parable says when we forget that, we tend to make bigger mistakes. When we think what we have is ours, we get possessive and want to protect it. Our thinking can become so distorted that we even act as if our possessions, the things in our life, are more important than human life. We become willing to kill in order to make sure we can keep what we already have.

That is exactly what the tenants do in the parable. They act like they own the vineyard. They are willing to kill those who would threaten that assumption. Ultimately forgetting we are only stewards leads to violence.

What does all of this have to do with celebrating our new sanctuary? Let me suggest a couple of things we might want to ponder on this great day. Whose sanctuary is this? Many have worked long and hard to remodel this beautiful worship space. Many others have given of their treasure to make sure we could accomplish as much as we possibly could. It is tempting to think this is our sanctuary.

That is simply not the case. This is God's sanctuary. Our job as tenants of this space is to make it as welcoming as God's grace. When we take special care to make the chancel accessible to all who are differently-abled, we are living into that reality. When we invite all who are baptized, gifted and called to share in leadership in this church and in worship we are remembering this is God's sanctuary. When we create worship services that reflect a variety of musical tastes and involve people of all ages, including young children, we are remembering this is God's sanctuary. When we invite all who trust in God to come to the table and eat, and when age is not a barrier as to whom can serve the elements, we are remembering this is God's sanctuary where the whole community is welcome to serve. All of that is part of being good stewards of this space.

One other point we might want to ponder this day concerns Jesus' desire we produce fruits worthy of the kingdom. If our worship in this space does not help us produce good fruit, then all the wonderful music, all the eloquent words spoken and heard, are empty. They are worthless. Worship that does not form us as people of God, that does not inspire us to practice what we preach, that does not push us beyond our comfort zones, is not worship worthy of God.

When we dedicate this space for worship, we are committing ourselves to be formed by the worship that happens here. We are committing ourselves to hear God's word on a deep level, on a level that gets underneath our defenses and excuses so it can guide us into faithfulness.

Fred Craddock says according to Matthew God expects us to bear three main fruits: "righteous living, human caring, and courageous witnessing." He says that is Matthew's understanding of bearing good "fruit."

We each might ask ourselves what fruit does our worship produce in us? Are we living more righteously? Righteous living means living in such a way that we are fulfilling what makes for healthy relationships. Do we leave worship each Sunday as better parents, friends, siblings, disciples? Does our worship break down the anger and resentment that make it impossible for us to forgive others and seek reconciliation?

How about human caring? Does our worship inspire us to reach out to the poor or outcaste as we express our care for God's creation? Are we inspired to volunteer time as

part of what we give back to God in our stewardship? Do we, because of our worship, see Jesus in the least of these, and respond accordingly?

And does our worship touch us in such positive ways we want to invite others to share this experience? Does worship help us find our voice when opportunities arise the rest of the week to witness to the truth we hold dear?

I believe we have been good stewards of God's generous gifts in creating this wonderful worship space. I hope as we worship here in the years to come that we can grow in our understanding of what it means to be a steward and not an owner. I hope we can worship in such a way that our lives may bear good fruit. As we eat the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation this day, may this meal nourish us to incarnate God's love in all that we do. That is the best way to show our thankfulness. Amen