

The Chief Cornerstone

Matthew 21:42-44

Sunday, October 4, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Introduction

I remember a year of hospital chaplaincy training led by a former Catholic priest from Ireland named Steven. He was a wonderful guy and did a great job as our leader and teacher in this program. One of his projects was a sort of group therapy in which the chaplaincy residents sat in a circle in silence until we all had "gotten in touch with our feelings". The feelings were often negative; irritation, sorrow, despair, anger (lots of anger) and especially frustration. At one point, I said, "Steven, can we get in touch with some contentment for a change?" His reply? "Dan, you sound frustrated." I guess I was. Another emotion, if you can call it that, was the feeling of rejection; that there are people we love who do not love us back. That we do not matter to people who matter to us. Enduring rejection, I think, is a common theme of the human experience.

Set the stage

In our passage for today, Jesus is having another debate with the religious leaders of the day and he tells a couple of pointed parables. The second one involves a vineyard whose owner sends servants, and then his son, to collect rent from the vineyarders only to have them abused and killed. He then asked the leaders what the owner should do. They said he should make an end of those criminals and rent the vineyard to more reputable vineyarders. Jesus then quoted Psalm 118:22-23, a Messianic psalm that emphasizes God's ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The leaders were enraged, for they knew that He was talking about them.

the meaning of the chief cornerstone of the vineyard

Vineyards like this were common in the days of Jesus, and hard to make profitable. It often took 4 years of work to make a profit in a vineyard, so ownership was often the domain of the wealthy who lived elsewhere.

Vinedressers were serfs who lived on land and paid a portion of the profits to the landowner as rent. Regarding the murder of the landowner's servants who came to collect rent, in ancient times even during war the killing of an unarmed messenger was treachery.

A vineyard was also a very well known symbol of the nation and of the people of God. Isaiah 5:1-7 bears a marked similarity with the parable Jesus told.

application: the Lord is very familiar with rejection

There is much to consider in this passage. One is the warning of judgment on the religious leadership of the day, in which they care for the spiritual state of Israel is likened to dishonest and murderous vinedressers. This is the triumph of Jesus the Messiah, who rules all creation even after His rejection and murder by the people. But it is that fact of rejection that serves as my focus today. Jesus knew what it was like to be rejected. In fact, it is a major theme of Scripture that God becomes a God of wrath only after constant rejection by the people. The Bible is full of episodes in which God pursues, warns and pleads with His people, only to have them reject Him again and again. That is a very human suffering, and it means that we have a Savior who understands well the pain we feel when someone rejects us, especially someone for whom we love and care. He can empathize and heal when we suffer rejection because He knows it well Himself.

Conclusion

In this famous parable Jesus, borrowing heavily from Isaiah 5, compares Israel with a vineyard owned by God and cared by vinedressers, who are the religious leaders of the day. Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders (Psalm 118) who proves to be the chief cornerstone of a new nation made of both Gentiles and Jews. It is a story of triumph and wrath, but also a revelation that our Savior knows how to deal tenderly with those who suffer cruel rejection, because He has endured it Himself. That is one of the reasons, maybe the most personal one, that makes Him the Chief Cornerstone.