What Shall I Do?

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 20:9-19

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Memorial Day is a day to remember and honor those who have died while serving in the armed forces. We also give thanks for the many men and women and their families who sacrifice so much for the freedom and the lifestyles we enjoy. Their example of devotion and dedication is an inspiration to us all.

Each Memorial Day, I remember my brother Britt, whom I have shared about before. This picture was taken the year he died in a jet crash due to a mechanical failure while on a training flight. He was 23 and hadn’t been in the Air Force very long.

In the midst of our pain, we found comfort in knowing that my brother had felt called to military life and to be a pilot in particular, which he pursued with unrelenting dogged determination until it happened. At one point, he sat down with my mother and told her that he understood the risks of this profession and that if something should happen to him, he wanted her and all of us to know that he was doing what he wanted to do and felt called to do. Even at a very young age, he had a sense of identity and mission.

On Memorial Day, I think about my brother and others who have made the ultimate sacrifice in service of their country so we can enjoy freedom. And I think about how much they are like Jesus who willingly laid down his life so that we can be free from sin and death.

In our sermon series on the Gospel of Luke, we have seen how Jesus is clear about his identity and mission. At this point in the gospel, Jesus has entered Jerusalem riding on a
donkey colt. He knows and wants other to know who he is: the Messiah, the Son of David, the true King of Israel, the Lord of all. And, as he enters Jerusalem, he knows what he is called to do: in just a few days, he will suffer and die for the sins of many.

The tension and conflict is growing between Jesus and the religious leaders. They are looking for a way to trap Jesus so they can carry out their plan to kill him, believing he has committed blasphemy. They begin to question his authority to teach, but Jesus is too smart and too wise to fall prey to their snares and refuses to answer them directly. Instead, he tells the parable we heard earlier.

The parable is about a landowner who leases his vineyard to tenants and goes to another country for a long time. The practice of landlords leasing vineyards or olive groves to tenants was common and well understood in Jesus’ day. The landowner was gone long enough for the tenants to grow rebellious, greedy and vengeful, wanting to keep all the produce of the vineyard for themselves rather than give the owner his due. So the owner sends three servants. Each is beaten and sent away or thrown out empty-handed.

We cannot escape the meaning of this parable, which has a long memory of Israel’s history with echoes of the song of the vineyard found in Isaiah 5 as well as other Old Testament passages. God is the owner and the vineyard
serves as a symbol for Israel. The tenants represent the Jewish religious leaders. The servants represent the prophets sent by God to His people/Israel who were rejected and killed time and again with John the Baptist being the most recent example.

The theme of the parable is a reminder of God’s repeated appeal made through his prophets and how God’s people have responded over and over. We are meant to see Jesus’ ministry against the dramatic backdrop of centuries of God’s efforts to call, reform, and renew Israel. Jesus’ life and ministry is the culmination of God’s redemptive efforts.

At this point, we gain an inside view of the vineyard owner’s thoughts when he asks, “What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.”

The vineyard owner’s decision to send his “beloved son” echoes the earlier references to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. At his baptism a voice declared: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Again, at his transfiguration, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35).

Though the question is not in the text, I think it is implied. The tenants are forced to ask the same question in relationship to the son, the heir of the vineyard: What shall we do?

Instead of respecting the son as the owner had hoped, they come up with the scheme to grab the vineyard for themselves: “Let us kill
him so that the inheritance may be ours” (Luke 20:14). If the owner died with no heir, they as the tenants might have a claim to the vineyard. In this parable, Jesus is prophesying that the Jewish leaders are going to commit conspiracy to murder him—the Son of God.

Contrary to their assumptions about taking control, the wicked tenants do not determine the outcome of the story by killing the heir. God is sovereign and God will prevail—not human sinfulness and not human willfulness. It is not the tenants who determine the course of events. God’s purposes will not be defeated.

At this point, Jesus turns to the people and asks this question: “What shall the owner of the vineyard do to them?” The question hangs in the air. The owner had a decision to make. He sent his beloved son. The tenants had a decision to make. They killed the son. Now the audience is drawn into the parable. This question is important because it reminds Jesus’ listeners then and us now that the owner still holds the initiative for determining the end of the story. What will God do for the failed stewardship over Israel? There is a threefold answer to the question.

First, the owner will come. This resonates with the Old Testament prophecies of the Lord’s coming and Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem and entry into the temple. The King of kings and Lord of lords is present and at work. And, nothing that the tenants or the Jewish leaders do will thwart God’s sovereign will.
Second, the owner will destroy the wicked tenants. The parable symbolically but graphically predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which Jesus talks more about in chapter 21. By the time the Gospel of Luke is written, these historical events have already happened.

Finally, the owner will give the vineyard to others, which is his prerogative to do. After his resurrection, Jesus will commission his disciples to take the gospel to all the world. By the time the Gospel of Luke had been written, the mantle of leadership had passed from Israel’s religious leaders to the leaders of the early church and the gospel had been extended to the Gentiles through missions.

Now Jesus transitions from the metaphor of the vineyard to that of a building. “What then does this text mean: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the corner-stone’?”

The cornerstone or foundation stone is the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It is crucial since all other stones in a building will be set in reference to this stone, thus determining the position of the entire structure. Jesus is the cornerstone—the foundation of our lives and the head of the church—who guides and empowers his people to live out their true identity and mission.

So if this cornerstone is rejected or destroyed, what will happen? “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” The entire
building will fall down with a crushing impact as you saw in the children’s message. This is what happens when people insist on having their own way and reject God’s means of salvation in Jesus and the life he created us to live.

Many hear this and wonder, “Is God mean, punitive, vindictive, vengeful?” Perhaps an illustration from Robert Mulholland’s book *The Deeper Journey* might help us understand this from a new perspective. Imagine you are on a rooftop garden of a penthouse of a skyscraper. The time comes for you to stop what you are doing and go to the restaurant down the street for dinner. “What if, rather than taking the elevator, you decided simply to step off the edge of the roof? Does gravity suddenly become mean, punitive, vindictive, vengeful, retributive? Of course not! It simply continues to be gravity, and you quickly experience the deadly consequences of placing your life out of harmony with it.”

“We are created to find our fullness of life in loving union with God. When we live in such a relationship, our lives are integrated; we possess a deep inner stability and experience wholeness. When, however, we step out of that loving union with God, when we rebel against this essential reality of our being, we begin to experience the disintegration, instability and brokenness that results from uprooting our lives from their true center.”

*Robert Mulholland, The Deeper Journey*
When Jesus is rejected as the cornerstone or foundation of our lives, the walls will come tumbling down. As we are called to live with the natural law of gravity, so we are called to live according to the spiritual reality that Christ is the cornerstone. He is Lord of all.

At this point, the religious leaders understand this parable is against them, and they want to seize Jesus but fear how the people might start a riot because they believe he is a prophet of God. So they wait for another time.

So what? What does this parable have to do with my everyday life? It might surprise you, but this parable reveals God’s heart. God is patient, kind, long-suffering, persevering, seeking out His people. God created us for a loving relationship with Him and has over and over again called His people to come to Him. Finally, He sent His son as John 3:16-17 so beautifully reminds us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17).

This is God’s heart. God loves and longs to save people. But these verses also reveal humanity’s problem: Sin. Simply put, sin is a rejection of God. It is a rejection of God as love, mercy, goodness, beauty, and truth. Grace rejected becomes condemnation.

While this parable is told in the context of religious leaders in Jesus’ day, it would be a grave mistake to think it is only about them. It’s about us—all of us. The essence of sin is humanity’s failure to take its place in covenant with God. Our human problem is that we forget who God is and we forget who we are in relationship to God. The parable hauntingly depicts self-serving rebellion against God’s sovereignty in
every time and place. We were created to trust and be dependent on God—to let God be God. Instead, we insist on having our own way.

This sinful impulse is insidiously dynamic. The tenants did not start out to take the vineyard from its owner; they only wanted to keep its produce for themselves. They did not set out to commit murder, but they started down a path of greed that led to rebellion which led to violence, murder, and ultimately not only the loss of the vineyard but their own destruction.

As I was reflecting on this passage, Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina came to mind. It is a great but disturbing story of how little compromises that focus on self lead to disintegration spiritually, psychologically, and relationally, finally leading to death. It might not be so dramatic in real life, but make no mistake—that kind of disintegration is happening all the time with choices to lie, cover up, and look out for our own interests and not the interests of others.

The question asked in the parable is the question that each one of us must ask: What shall I do? A response is required. We have already seen the results of rejecting Jesus, but he wants us to make the wise choice: I shall accept God’s grace in Jesus and build my life on Christ the Cornerstone. This parable makes clear that we need to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. What was rejected can be chosen. It is a relationship with Jesus based on who he is and what he has done that saves us—not religion or our works.

The invitation is to build our lives on Jesus as the cornerstone, our sure foundation. But this is not a one-time decision. It is a way of life in which we willingly and continually surrender to Jesus as the Lord of life who wants to guide and direct us in all we do.
How do we live with Christ as the cornerstone? We must heed the implicit warning in the parable. We, too, have been given stewardship of God’s vineyard, and we must be careful that we do not fall prey to selfish ends rather than giving to God the fruit of the vineyard He has entrusted to us. So here are some suggestions on how do we live with Christ as the cornerstone.

Believe: Do you believe that all that you are and all that you have is a gift of grace? We live in a culture where individualism and independence are highly valued. And, we live in an achievement and accumulation culture where doing and having more is perceived as better. But there is a danger in defining happiness by what I have, what I can do, and what others think of me. Because it’s not about me; it’s about God. Faith is allowing God to be God and trusting in who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he thinks about me. He is the one who has given us life and everything else. We belong to God, and all that we have is His. Each of us is meant to live trusting in Him as the owner of all I have and seeing myself as the tenant, the steward, the manager of the gifts and resources He has given me.

How to live with Christ as the Cornerstone

- Believe: Do you believe that all that you are and all that you have is a gift of grace?

I saw this sign on the wall of a gym in a school, and I typed it up and printed it, and put it up in our house:

Watch your thoughts, for they become your words.
Watch your words, for they become your actions.
Watch your actions, for they become your habits.
Watch your habits, for they become your character.
Watch your character, for they become your destiny.

We are all in the process of becoming a certain kind of person. Who we become begins with our thoughts and
beliefs, which continue to be nurtured and formed through words and actions. We live what we believe.

That leads to the next point. Be alert: What do your thoughts, words, actions, habits say about what you believe? Do they reflect values of our culture or the kingdom? Let’s be more specific: What do you think about? How do you spend your time and money? We might spend our resources on our home, recreation, vacations, entertainment, and eating out. Don’t misunderstand me, these are not bad things. These are gifts to enjoy. The question is whether they have their proper place in our lives or whether they are distracting us or even pulling us away from Jesus and who we are meant to be in Christ. I love movies, but I confess watching TV and movies can be a way of dealing with my stress. That’s wrong. I’m a problem solver. It’s a gift—a strength, but when I can’t quiet my mind and obsess about work or situations, that’s a problem that can have destructive consequences for me and others around me.

So being alert to my thoughts, words, and actions through the spiritual discipline of Examen helps me know when I need to take a turn. I take time to talk to a friend or receive renewing prayer, or begin to employ another spiritual discipline as a means of offering myself to God for needed transformation so that I can experience the abundant life of love, joy, and peace. Which leads to the last point.

Be intentional: What are the practices, relationships, and experiences that will help you

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become like Christ together for the world? If habits form our character, we can choose holy habits or spiritual disciplines as a means of offering ourselves to God to do what only He can do in transforming us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can choose intention-al holy habits like Bible study, prayer, spiritual friendships, service, and mission projects as a way of living out our commitment to the person, body, and work of Christ. The Holy Spirit uses all of these things to transform us, enabling us to become like Christ together for the world. This is God’s will: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

Memorial Day is a day to remember those who died in service to their country and to be inspired by their example. But it can also be a day to ask, “What am I living for right here and now?” God wants us to be faithful tenants, faithful stewards. So that question still matters: What shall I do? What shall I do this summer with the change of pace and perhaps schedule to live with Christ as my cornerstone? And it’s not too early to begin asking, what shall I do come September to arrange my life to live with Christ as my cornerstone? It is a question each of us is asked and that we answer intentionally or unintentionally in the ways we live: What shall I do?