

Cornerstones and New Foundations

Matthew 21:42-43

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Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kin-dom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kin-dom..."

Matthew 21:42-43

I don't know what experiences you have with cornerstones. I remember the church I served in Scotch Plains, NJ. Willow Grove Presbyterian Church. There was a cCornerstone in the Stone Chapel built in 1887. The whole chapel built from stones and rocks from farmers' fields in that area.

Cornerstones, historically, are the first stone laid during a building project, so that the rest of the construction would find their reference point from that one stone. Over time, they became more ceremonial, with dignitaries on hand to put time capsules full of newspaper articles and such into the stone for future generations to discover, so they can look back and remember. (1)

Our congregation, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, had a special cornerstone. Some of our church historians – Sandra Fisk, John Hinman and George Davison – reminded me where to find the information. The Old Stone Church was built in the 1890's. A cornerstone was placed there on February 3, 1894. In 1972 it was determined that the walls of the Stone Church was not earthquake safe and the walls could not be retrofitted, it had to be torn down. Almost by surprise, the cornerstone with a special box was found inside. I found in the history files a list of all the items found inside the cornerstone. The items included a 1893 Bible, a catalogue of classes from San Francisco Theological Seminary from 1891, a photograph of the pastor Rev. W.B. Noble, The Morning Call newspaper from San Francisco (Feb. 3, 1894) and The Marin Journal Feb. 1, 1894. The discovery of the box inside the stone was featured in an article in the Independent Journey Jan. 20, 1972. They had been hunting for the box and finally found it in one of blocks.

One of amazing revelation was that in the Marin Journal 1894, there was a column entitled Domestic News. The purpose was to list and locate disease across the country, giving the location and severity of smallpox outbreaks, chicken pox and other maladies of the day. It is interesting to read that after a year facing the Covid 19 virus across our country and the world. So this cornerstone and contents give us a glimpse of life and faith of our congregation in the 1890's.

I've been thinking about cornerstones—what it is that anchors us, what is it that gives us the sight lines to know how to build our lives in the directions we feel God is calling us?

When FPCSR was founded, 150 years ago, it was a very different world. A world where identity was largely received—by that I mean that if your parents were Presbyterian, you were likely to be Presbyterian when you grew up too.

Today, we live in a world that values experience over tradition. There is less trust in institutions, which used to be the mediator of traditions, and so even if we like the idea of traditions, we have lost connection to them. People will not just show up to a church unless there is an experience and a reason for them to be there.

Another difference is that today a person takes in more information in one day than a person in the medieval world would have received in their entire life. We're drinking information from a fire hose, people.

I often hear a wistfulness for the past, for the time when everyone was in church, children filled our Sunday school rooms and our youth group was one of the best in the Marin County. And it's okay to remember those days and even to mourn what we have lost. One aspect we have talked about in the past year is being reminded of the basic core values we have as a church even when we were not in our building. And we are reflecting on what the building means and what the cornerstone real or imagined means as we prepare to come back to the building.

Is our building something we have so we are better equipped to build the Beloved Community and live into what God is dreaming for us? Can cornerstones and buildings become barriers?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, we read about David. When David became King, he thought he would be the one to build a special place for the Ark of the Covenant where the tablets of the 10 commandments were kept. It was believed that is where God was present. It was in a tent and that did not seem right to David. So he started to make plans to build an elaborate building, a temple. He was sure that was what God wanted. But the prophet Nathan had to break it to him. No, God does not want you to build. David was perplexed, but listened. (2)

It was not building projects that would redeem and deepen David's devotion to the Holy One. It is not our building or sanctuary alone that deepens our connection to Divine Love. It is what we allow God to build in us, with us. God says to David, the "Lord will make you a house." (II Samuel 7:11) David himself is to be built by God. It isn't what David builds that matters. It is what God builds in David that is eternal.

I wonder if God is calling David to stay open to God's work, God's promise to build something with his very life. David is a flawed hero. *A flawed hero who loves God.* David comes to a place of allowing God to build him as a house, strong walls of gratitude and a foundation of grace.

The metaphors of buildings, foundations, stones and rocks are used often in scripture about people and communities of faith. Jesus famously tells Peter, "*on this rock, I will build my church,*" referring to Peter himself, and giving him his new nickname, Rocky.

The writer of Ephesians picks up this theme too. "*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*" (Eph 2:19-22)

We are built and shaped by God. Built together into a dwelling place for Spirit, Divine Mystery. A home for Divine Love.

So what is being built in us right now? We are in a liminal time. An in-between time. After over a year of living the reality of the pandemic, with everything changing about daily life, and realizing the world has changed and we have changed, how do we move into the future? We can't see clearly where we are headed. There is a sense we want some things to go back the way they were. There is another sense that we cannot. But it is not clear what is next. That is hard and exciting. What does it mean to be the church in a post pandemic world? I don't know, but I am going to stand with you in this in-between time as we discern together who God is calling us to be.

As we walk through this threshold, what does it mean to come back to the building? We need to name our core values and mission. How then do we use this building to live out those values and mission? Maybe we see the building in new ways and imagine placing an imaginary cornerstone at 5th and E in the patio, in the entry, on the website? Or maybe it feels like too much is changing and some want to believe the church can be like it was. Leave it as it is. Hmm

I will close with a biblical story I have recently read. I attended an excellent webinar this week presented by Susan Beaumont. Her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* was published in 2019. She admits she could have never imagined how salient it would be in 2020-21. She is so good at naming what churches and organizations are going through in this time.

God's people have grappled with liminality since the beginning of recorded history. Eras end and people endure extended periods of disorientation while they wait to discover a way forward. This phenomenon is not uniquely ours.

Beaumont invites us to consider a story in the book of Ezra. In this book, we read a story of the Jewish nation finding its way back to Jerusalem after a period of exile. The first temple and the accompanying way of life that supported the temple, is gone. However the foundation for a new temple is being laid, and the people gather to celebrate this important new start for the community. (3) This is how the Hebrew scriptures describe the gathering:

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.
Ezra 3:11b-13

I hear both – weeping and shouts of joy. Weeping for what we have lost and what will never be the same. Shouts of joy as new ways of being the church emerge and new opportunities to invite people to deepen their experience of Presence of the Holy and commitment to building the Beloved Community in justice, peace and deep love for all people. Living in this in-between not quite knowing where we are going is hard. We want to see how our building blocks can be used by the Spirit. The liminal season is ripe for learning and growth.

Let's build on the past and move into the future following the ways of Jesus.

We want a church that is built on

- ❖ Being a community gathering place online and in person
- ❖ Our commitment to Anti-racism and standing against hate
- ❖ A deep calling to social justice and environmental justice
- ❖ Being a place for asking challenging questions
- ❖ Engaging the heart and mind
- ❖ Being a community of friends, of seekers, of compassionate companions

We are built and shaped by God. Built together into a dwelling place for Spirit, Divine Mystery. A home for Divine Love. Individually, we each have a piece of what is needed. Together, with Christ as the cornerstone, we are joined together to build this shared dwelling place. Amen.

1) Rev. Marci Glass, "The Cornerstone," 2/28/16

<https://marciglass.com/2016/02/28/the-cornerstone/>

2) Rev. Marci Glass, "Build A House," 10/23/2016

<https://marciglass.com/2016/10/23/build-a-house/>

3) Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.