

Princeton University Chapel  
The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Matthew 21:33-46

## The Rejected Cornerstone

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An important ceremony took place on the morning of Saturday, June 13, 1925. That was the day on which the cornerstone for this building – the “new” Princeton University Chapel – was laid. Several years before that, the old Romanesque chapel, Marquand Chapel, had been destroyed by fire. The university decided to rebuild the chapel near the old site, but in the collegiate gothic style that was so fashionable in the 1920s.

It was an impressive ceremony. According to the *Daily Princetonian*, Ralph Adams Cram, the distinguished architect of this building, was present. Cram spoke in grand terms about the planned chapel. In fact, he compared it to the soaring medieval cathedrals of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Cram said that the architects of those cathedrals wanted to create such impressive structures that future generations would say that they were “mad.” Cram hoped that this would also be the case with this building.

Another speaker, Princeton University trustee Edward Dickens Duffield, also spoke in grand terms. Duffield compared the “great height” of the planned chapel to the “symbol of religion towering above and shedding light on the building of science below.” He said that the new chapel would “surpass in magnificence every other building on campus,” and that would convey the message that education reaches its “highest point in the religion of Jesus Christ.”

Although it would be another three years before this chapel was completed and dedicated, the speakers that morning were right about the grandeur of this building. I mean, just look around!

The cornerstone laying ceremony concluded with a prayer that described Jesus Christ as the “chief corner-stone,” and all those who were present sang the hymn “The Church’s One Foundation.”

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Today’s reading from the Gospel According to St. Matthew focuses on the architectural image of the “cornerstone.” If you think about it, the cornerstone, or *kephalēn gōnias* in the Greek, is a key part of any building. The cornerstone is not simply the first stone that is laid. Rather, the entire direction and placement of the building depends on this one stone. If the placement of the cornerstone is off by just a tiny bit, then the entire building will be off – by a lot.

By the way, do you know where the cornerstone of this building is actually located? Well, if you are standing outside the chapel and looking at the front doors, the cornerstone is just to the right of the doors. It has the year 1925 inscribed on it. Check it out when you leave today.

Anyway, extending this metaphor to the Christian faith, the cornerstone on which the church is built is of similar importance. If the cornerstone is off, then the entire church will be off.

The irony is, however, that Jesus' description of the cornerstone in today's gospel differs greatly from the grandiose language that was used at the chapel cornerstone laying ceremony back in 1925. Now it's understandable why Ralph Adams Cram and Edward Dickens Duffield used such lofty language on that celebratory and hopeful day. But rather than speaking in terms of soaring heights or unsurpassed magnificence, Jesus notes that his cornerstone was quite lowly and undistinguished. In fact, it had been rejected by the builders.

The reference to the rejected cornerstone in today's gospel reading follows a rather disturbing parable. An absent landowner had leased his vineyard to tenants. When it was harvest time, the landowner sent his representatives to collect the grapes. But instead of handing over the produce, the tenants beat, killed, and stoned the landowner's agents. Finally, the landowner decided to send his own son. "They will respect my son," the landowner said to himself. But the tenants also killed the son.

Now Jesus is referring to himself, of course, when he talks about the "stone that the builders rejected." Yes, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone on which the church is built. But he is also the son who was sent by the landowner and who was brutally killed by the tenants of the vineyard.

It's hard in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with Christianity having such an outsized role in our nation's religious and political life – and while sitting in this grand, soaring building – to think about the cornerstone of the church in lowly and undistinguished terms. But if you think about it, Jesus was a rabble-rouser who was rejected – and ultimately executed – as a common criminal by the religious and political leaders of his day. The true nature of the church's foundation is rejection, not glorification. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

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This coming Wednesday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, is National Coming Out Day. Founded in 1988 (which, by the way, was shortly after I came out of the closet during college), National Coming Out Day was intended to be a day of visibility for the LGBTQ community at a time when most people were still deeply in the closet. National Coming Out Day is still important today because coming out is, after all, the cornerstone of the queer liberation movement.

Things were so different for the queer community thirty-five years ago. At that time, the United States Supreme Court had just ruled that it was OK for states to criminalize same-sex acts. There was no legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the form of either civil unions or marriage. Most church denominations refused to recognize the existence of openly-queer people in their congregations, let alone to bless or ordain them. There was little to no visibility with respect to the lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and nonbinary communities. And the gay male community was being decimated by the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Although we've come a long way in the past thirty-five years, the need for National Coming Out Day has never been greater. In the past few years, we've seen a huge amount of backlash with respect to LGBTQ rights. So far this year, 574 anti-trans bills have been introduced across the nation – in every single state but Delaware. The federal courts have been systematically chipping away at fundamental rights with the help of Christian activist organizations. And earlier this year, under the guise of free speech, the United States Supreme Court said that it was perfectly OK for a website designer to turn away a client who wanted a website for his same-sex wedding.

I myself faced a horrible experience after officiating at a same-sex wedding right here in the Princeton University Chapel last summer. The wedding was for two of my friends who are Princeton alumnae. They decided to get married here not only because they loved their alma mater, but also because they couldn't get married in the Roman Catholic Church because they were lesbians. After the

wedding, I posted a photo of the ceremony on the social media platform formerly known as Twitter. A radical traditionalist Roman Catholic blog noticed the photo and encouraged its followers to flood my feed with hateful comments. It was so overwhelming that I literally had to take my account offline for several days.

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The irony is that, as we hear in today's gospel, the Church is founded not upon power, privilege, or glory. Rather, the Church is founded upon weakness, rejection, and humiliation. That is the queer message of the gospel.

As an openly-gay Episcopal priest, seminary professor, and theologian who has written about queer theology for the past two decades, I am convinced that the image of the rejected cornerstone is central for those of us who profess to follow the way of Jesus Christ.

I invite you, during this week of National Coming Out Day, to reflect upon today's gospel message. Who are the rejected people in your circles? Who do you view as being foolish, weak, low, or despised? Who are the strangers in your midst? Jesus reminds us that these are the very people upon which the foundation of the church is built. In other words, we find Jesus Christ not in places of soaring heights and unsurpassed magnificence, but in the margins and shadows of society. And that is why, for me, the gospel – and the church – is fundamentally queer.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”