

Scripture:

Matthew 21:33-46

“The great reversal.”

One way to faithfully describe the life --- death ---- ministry --- and resurrection of Jesus Christ ---- would be to call it the great reversal.

“The great reversal.”

“The first will be last and the last will be first” ---- as we heard Jesus say a few weeks back in Matthew’s gospel ---- a great reversal.

A kingship not of power and might --- but humility and submission ---- a great reversal.

Death leading to life ----- indeed life abundant and everlasting --- a great reversal.

More specifically for today ----- tiny piece of bread --- small cup ---- the most nourishing meal on earth.

And also specific to today ---- verse 42 in Matthew’s gospel ---- “The stone the builders rejected ---- has become the cornerstone.”

“The stone the builders rejected ---- has become the cornerstone.” --- another great reversal.

In a certain sense the life of Christ is all about a series of paradoxes --- seeming contradictions.

A whole host of ----- great reversals.

First to last --- from death to life ---- in humility and submission the greatest of power and might ----- from rejection to place of greatest prominence and importance --- the cornerstone.

And of course in Matthew’s gospel today we have a prime example of this great reversal that is Jesus Christ.

The chief priests and the Pharisees gather around and Jesus speaks -----

A landowner plants a vineyard ----- and along with the fields of grapes the landowner provides all that would have been necessary to turn seeds and soil into wine.

The fields --- the grapes ---- the winepress and all the other necessary measures ---- to ensure a fruitful crop ----- a watchtower as well as walls for security --- as verse 33 indicates.

Having a vineyard was tricky business ---- as we soon see ----- with the beatings --- stonings and murders that ensue.

There was very little luxury in Palestine at the time of Christ for the everyday worker ----- and having a vineyard was a challenging venture ---- ----- stealing grapes at their time of ripening was a constant threat.

And partly because of this ----- it was common for absentee landlords to rent out their estates and come around at the appointed times to collect their payment.

And so Jesus talks of a landowner sending some servants to collect his fruit payment.

And when the servants arrive the tenants seize one and beat him ----- kill the second and stone the third.

In other words they beat one and kill the other two.

Pretty harsh --- but also ---- apparently ---- not all that unusual at that time.

And so the tenant not wanting to miss out on his due ----- sends more servants ---- “more than the first time” --- verse 36 says.

And as the latter part of the same verse says ---- “the tenants treated them the same way.” ----- in other words they too were beaten and killed.

So ---- still eager to collect his due the landowner sends his very own son.

“They will respect my son, he said.” ---- in verse 37.

But of course they don't --- and they kill him too.

The tenants have approached that which they have been entrusted with as though it were their own.

Ownership instead of stewardship has been their driving principle.

And so after telling the story Jesus asks the chief priests and Pharisees what they think the landowner will do with these rogue tenants.

And they respond in verse 41 saying ---- "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end ----- and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Which of course if you think about it ----- sounds pretty reasonable ----- get rid of the troubled rogue tenants ---- and replace them with new ---- stick to the agreement kind of tenants.

But just then ----- the story kind of goes "kaboom" ---- and blows up in the face of the priests and Pharisees.

The great reversal.

Presbyterian Pastor Eugene Peterson famously said that the parables of Christ are narrative time bombs.

"The parables of Christ are narrative time bombs."

They are.

They are stories that weave their ways into people's hearts --- comforting at first ----- and then confusing them a little bit ---- followed by a bit of a break through ---- kaboom ---- and then finally concluding with a kind of a-ha moment.

And in truth they often come to us in a series of this kind of cycle.

A bit comforting ---- seemingly obvious points ----- then the feeling of --- "Hey wait a minute --- maybe there's more than just what I first thought..."

----- kaboom --- and then an a-ha moment ----- over and over again -----  
 ---- teaching us a little something different each and every time we read and  
 engage them.

For the chief priests and Pharisees the kaboom moment comes after they  
 offer their understandable ----- sensible ----and practical answer in verse 41 -  
 ----- “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end ---- and he will rent  
 the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at  
 harvest time.”

Makes sense doesn't it.

If people act a certain way ---- in this case go back on their initial  
 arrangement ----- there are consequences.

They get thrown out ----- and new people are brought in to replace them.

That's kind of how the world works.

If you do this then.....

And ----- if you don't do this then.....

And --- unfortunately ---- that's precisely how the chief priests and Pharisees  
 see things too.

If one does this then.....happens ----- and if one doesn't do this  
 then..... happens ----- actions and then appropriate  
 consequences.

The gospel ----- the kingdom of God that Jesus is all about ----- doesn't  
 work this way though ----- it's radically different from this if I do.....--  
 -- then..... happens ----- action ----- and consequence kind of thinking.

Yes there is a certain amount of accountability for our actions but the  
 kingdom of God is far less about what we have done ---or not done ----- and  
 instead is all about what God has done for us in Christ.

The chief priests and Pharisees have become so enthralled in interpreting the law ----- actions and consequence ---- if..... ---- then .....--- such that they are unable to see Jesus as the cornerstone of God's kingdom.

Put another way ----- our salvation doesn't depend on what we are able to accomplish or do.

Our salvation is ---- "fait accompli" ----- it's already done ---- because of God ----- and not because of anything we have done.

The chief priests and the scribes are left bickering about who has done the right thing ----- who has done the wrong thing --- what the right and proper ---- what the lawful thing to do is ----- such that they miss Christ in their very midst.

What if ----- that which you have rejected ----- because clearly the chief priests and Pharisees have already rejected Jesus ----- what if that which you have rejected Jesus says ----- turns out to be the cornerstone.

It's as if Jesus says ----- surely you're aware of this ---- that the rejected stone will itself become the cornerstone ----- because it's in the scriptures ---- Psalm 118 verse 22 --- and as priests and Pharisees you know your scriptures.

So if you know this ----- what about its application --- what about its reality - --- its coming to life --- in me Jesus ---- now --- right before your eyes?

Isn't that's the real question Jesus poses to the priests and Pharisees?

What about the very cornerstone --- what about the great reversal ----- coming alive before you ----- in me ---- today ----- here and now.

And in a certain sense isn't that the very same question for each and every one of us here today as well.

Yes we may know all about Christ ----- or at least a little something about Him.

But what we really need to know --- what we really ought to shift our focus to ----- is not what we may know about Him --- but that He is alive before us and among us in the here and now changing lives --- changing our lives.

The priests and Pharisees in Matthew's gospel today got so caught up and focused on the law and the interpretation of things that they missed Christ right before their eyes.

Yes they understood that the stone once rejected would become the cornerstone.

But they missed the once rejected stone becoming the cornerstone right in front of their eyes.

They only ever saw Jesus as a threat --- and just another traveling teacher among a whole host of other traveling teachers ----- and not also the Christ.

What we have set before us is a tangible reminder of the once rejected becoming the cornerstone.

What we have set before us is a tangible reminder of the great reversal that is the life ----- death --- ministry ----- and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's far more than just a table with some bread and some fruit of the vine.

It's far more than just a priest or pastor standing behind a table with a handful of servants and leaders speaking about something that happened eons ago in a small corner of the world we now call the Middle East.

God has done ----- and God continues to do amazing things.

That's part of what this table is all about ----- God having and God continuing to do amazing things and then some ----- in Jesus Christ.

Because of God..... ----- Is what this table is all about.

Because of God.....

And not ----

If I do this then ..... Such and such will happen ----- or ----- If I don't do this then .....such and such will happen.

No -----it's all about ----- because of God.

The chief priests and Pharisees are stuck in the --- "If I do this then...." -----  
- mode of living.

They haven't given themselves over to the ----- "Because of God....." ---  
---- mode of living and being.

They haven't given themselves over to the great reversal that is Jesus Christ.

They still only see and experience Jesus as a troubling ---- threatening  
traveling teacher --- and not also the Christ --- the Saving One --- the  
Messiah.

This table is all about Jesus the Christ ---- the Son of God ---- Saviour of the  
world.

The one who is the great reversal.

The one who is the stone that the builders --- the one the chief priests and  
Pharisees and so many others ----- have rejected ---- who in fact is the  
cornerstone.

In 2010 the movie ----- "The First Grader" ----- was released.

It tells the true story of an 84 year old Kenyan man who after the  
government announced universal and free elementary education in 2003 -----  
----- followed through on this promise --- and pursued it.

And at first when the 84 year old man Marugay walks all the way from his  
humble home to the overcrowded school he is turned away.

What is an 84 year old man doing ---- trying to come to grade one with a  
bunch of young children ----- the authorities ask themselves --- and they turn  
him away --- and send him home.

But he tries again ---- he buys books and pencils and even a school uniform so that outwardly he is dressed like all the little children in the school.

But again he is turned away.

But he perseveres ---- and finally after quite some time ----- he is eventually ----- and controversially ---- against what some consider to be good judgment ----- admitted into grade 1.

84 years old ---- grade one.

Most people --- including the authorities viewed the pronouncement of universal and free elementary education as a matter of law ---- all children must go to school under this new law.

But for Marugay ----- this announcement was like a promise --- and so he acts on it in this way --- as a promise extended to everyone ----- including himself.

And after finally getting admitted into grade 1 he not only learns to read and write ---- but he also helped the children to claim much more ----- specifically the desire to continually change and grow.

He lived out what he heard ----- universal and free education ----- as a promise --- instead of just an imposition or law.

Old Marugay ----- acted on this promise ----- seeing it as a great blessing and gift.

We too are called to live out of the promise of God ----- the reality of Jesus Christ ----- as a great blessing and a great gift --- and no just something imposed on us.

Jesus Christ ----- Jesus the Christ ----- is a great gift.

A gift that challenges --- encourages --- invites --- urges us even to live out the promises of God ----- to come along side Him and live in this ----- “great reversal” ----- way of being.

In Christ we are called to turning away from ----- an imposed ----- “If I do this then.....happens” ----- way of being ----- to a ----- “Because of God.....” ----- way of being.

“Because of God” ----- is our cornerstone --- or at least ought to be.

Not ----- “**I** have accomplished or **I** have done.”

The great reversal that is life in Christ ---- begins with a shift to seeing everything as ----- because of God.

Because of God .....

Because of God ----- everything!

The great reversal -----

----- last to first --- I once was blind but now I see ----- from death to life -  
----- sin to salvation in Jesus Christ --- the once rejected ----- now  
cornerstone.

All ----- because of God.

Amen.