

Message for 6-21-26

Christ is the Cornerstone, and the Covenant is the North Star

Shared by Rev. Ken Heintzelman

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone;^[h] ²¹ in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually^[i] into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

There was a pastor who was terrible about remembering people's names. He would get his Lindas mixed up, and he would call "Jordan" - "Jason"; he was terrible. He developed a trick to help him. He would have a list of names printed on a piece of paper and had it pinned inside his coat. People would come through the line, and he would shake their hand, and he would say, "It is so good to see you,---- Bill Peterson. Oh my goodness! It is so good to see you,--- Linda! And so it would go.

It came time for this beloved absent-minded pastor to retire. He gave his farewell speech.

"I am so grateful to all of you and all the love and support you gave me in my time here. I want to remind you that you are in good hands with the caring and competent staff ---Lois Beberniss, and --- Heidi Zinn. The board is in excellent leadership with board president ---- Linda Merritt. You will do great things and thrive in the vineyard of our Lord and Savior --- Jesus Christ.

Vineyard of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I want to give you some tools for your toolbox, both as individual members and as a congregation, as you navigate my departure and your new pastor's arrival. I remind you that you are connected to the next minister even before you know who they are or meet them. They are your sibling in the Spirit of Life and Love. I gave you some ideas to help you evaluate your relationship and your interactions. All relationships go through phases. We

can see this in our relationships with our family and at our job, and in the relationship between our pastor and our congregation. You will go through the stages of idealization, realization, and mutualization. When you experience conflict, do a reality check about your expectations and renegotiate the boundaries. Today, I am asking you to consider what it means to make Christ your cornerstone and the Covenant your North Star.

I thank Tanner for sharing the song, “In Christ Alone.” It is one of my foundational songs in terms of my identity. The third verse is most powerful for me.

No guilt in life.

No fear in death.

This is the power of Christ in me.

From life’s first cry, to final breath,

Jesus commands my destiny.

No power of hell,

No scheme of man,

Can ever pluck me from his hand.

Till he returns or calls me home,

Here in the power of Christ I’ll stand.

There have been moments when the power of hell and the schemes of human beings have tried to intimidate me and rob me of my trust in the power of love. My most recent memory of this is related to the cruel powers of immigration policy and enforcement. Thank God, this verse has reminded me and encouraged me.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not talking about an exclusive, simplistic, literal interpretation of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. I am not saying you must believe the right thing, the right way, at the right time in order to have your soul train ticket punched so you can go to heaven. I understand that it may be hard to hear my point on this if you

have been traumatized by people with this narrow and literal interpretation. I humbly ask that you try to hear my meaning and not just my words.

I am saying that my journey has Christ as the cornerstone, and on this cornerstone I have built my life of love and service. I say with confidence that all religions are human constructs, and this includes Christianity. I also say with confidence that anyone who delves deeply into their religion will become a spiritual person, leading a life of love and service. I do not really care what a person believes. I care how they love and serve. It just so happens that the life, the way, the spirit, and vision of Jesus is my cornerstone. It is not sufficient to say on a theoretical level that Jesus is one way among many. It is only barely sufficient to say that Jesus is the life-transforming and love-empowering presence that is mine and I am his. I would put this in the same category as my covenant with my wife, Peg.

Theoretically, there are many people out in the world, and I could have married any of them, but I did not, and I cannot imagine another way or another life. This truth is not theoretical; it is existential. I could have been born in any other country and any other time, but I live my life here and now. It is not theoretical; it is existential. Tony Spencer has affectionately called me a Christian apologist, a defender of the faith, and the faith community of Shadow Rock has tolerated me, and some of you have found me mildly amusing. I have made my share of mistakes and have been found wanting, but Jesus is my Lord, and the theological concept of Christ is my cornerstone. On this foundation I have tried to live a life of love and service.

When I came to Shadow Rock, I knew some of the theologies of Bultmann, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and H. Richard Niebuhr, but I had not put them together in the way I discovered at Shadow Rock. Joseph Matthews took a theological needle and thread and strung together a couple of ideas from these dead white Germans and created a pathway to renew the Church for modern times. Bultmann asks what we could possibly mean by the word "God." He answers his question by saying that all we share universally of the most profound human experiences is the only thing we could possibly mean. God is the height and depth of our love and suffering. God is the totality of existence of which we experience only in part. If the total horrifying and beautiful experiences of life are what we mean by the word G-O-D, then we have to decide how we will relate to God. When we put the horrors and beauties on a scale, which way does the scale tip? Just as a pure human heart can tip the scale over the lightness of a feather, so one beautiful thing can tip the scale against a

hundred horrors. We have to decide how we will relate to life as it is, not as we wish or hope it would be, but as it is, with honesty and courage. Tillich encourages us to relate to life through the lens of grace and write our life stories embracing life as a gift. From a foundation of grace, Bonhoeffer reminds us we are empowered to take responsibility for our well-being and the destiny of our lives. We are free to succeed and to fail because we are free to live our best lives and leave the rightness or wrongness of our decisions to history. However, we do not live as isolated islands. H. Richard Niebuhr reminds us we live in community. We live as the people of God, committed to engaging the world and making life good for all people. We strive to live in right relationship with history. God is always doing new things of peace, justice, inclusion, and intimacy of Spirit. We get the privilege of perceiving, discerning, and responding to God's work among us. We get the joy of using our gifts to meet the needs in the world.

The founders of Shadow Rock knit together key phrases from these theologians and composed our mission and vision statement, called the Covenant. Jesus is the cornerstone and the Covenant is the north star. The Cross is our prophetic source, and the Wedgeblade of History is our prophetic outcome.

They offer themselves as two fixed points for you. Stand by them and with them. Use them to debate your calling and mission. Let them pull you into pray and study. Most importantly, dance with them and around them. Yes, I said to dance.

As fixed points, they offer themselves as principles for guidance, to which you can throw yourselves to break yourselves and challenge your personal preferences. They are there for you to bend and stretch yourselves. We have seen what happens to our country when we do not have a shared foundation such as the constitution, to shape and debate our values, vision, and institutions. We have chaos and meanness. The same is true for a congregation. You lose your way if you are dependent upon the personal preferences of lay and clergy leaders. Every person, every decision, and every action should be held accountable to the cornerstone of Jesus and to the North Star of the Shadow Rock Covenant.

Here is an interesting thing about cornerstones and North Stars. Cornerstones are not finished buildings. You do not know what will be completed by looking at the cornerstone, but do not try to build without one. The North Star no longer has the value in modern

navigation that it once had, but it still serves as a metaphor. The North Star was a fixed point by which ships could figure out where they were and where they were going. When they were exploring, they didn't always know what the destination would look like, but they moved through the world as adventurers, carrying the hope of new discoveries.

Our ministry together is ending. I was never the cornerstone, and you are not a finished dwelling for God's people. Our ministry together is ending. You had the covenant long before I got here, and you will have it long after I leave. The adventure to love and serve will call you to discoveries about yourselves and Shadow Rock's place in the world. Amen.