

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A SERMON on the STONE

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

Many of the scripture readings for the closing Sundays of Lent contain what I call “the hard sayings of Jesus.” Those “hard sayings” are challenging words intended to shake us up, to lead us toward honest self-examination but they are NOT words of condemnation or final judgment. Those “hard sayings” can give us new insight and perspective, helping us better understand how God’s unconditional love for us demands and expects nothing less than our very best response.

Today’s scripture reading (John 9:1-41) has to do with a healing. Jesus gives sight to a man who has been blind from birth. The assumption is that this man is under a verdict of punishment—that either he or his parents had incurred God’s anger and judgment. When Jesus accepts this blind man as simply a person who needs love and compassion more than judgment, the religious authorities refuse to accept such pardon and forgiveness. They accuse Jesus of being in league with the forces of evil. They dismiss his healing power and they reject Jesus as having any credibility as a teacher or as the chosen One of God. What they don’t realize is that they are, literally, fulfilling the words of Jesus in which he says, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

The scribes and the chief priests—those who were most opposed to Jesus and who were determined to destroy him—They reject the notion that Jesus can be the Chosen One—the keystone that holds the ultimate Truth. Jesus points to himself as the stone that, like a weapon in God’s hands, will, if they try to dislodge it from the keystone of the arch, ultimately fall upon them and they will be crushed by its enormous size and weight. For anyone who thinks Jesus was always gentle, meek, and mild, how about THIS “hard saying?”

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In stone construction there are two elements that matter more than anything else. The first is the cornerstone and the other is the keystone or “capstone.” The cornerstone is placed at the very beginning and is the determining factor of how straight and solid the rest of the building will be because everything else takes its alignment from, and rests upon, that one—hopefully precise and solid—stone. Stone buildings of the traditional sort have no structural steel holding them up. All the walls and arches thrust their weight against a central block that may weigh as much as a ton all by itself. If either the cornerstone or the keystone were to prove faulty or to be removed the entire building would immediately collapse.

Jesus is making a powerful and dramatic claim in telling us that **he** is the essential stone in the whole creation that is God's kingdom. To expand the architectural metaphor, Jesus is saying that if he is removed, the whole plan and purpose collapses, crushes those who are responsible for tampering with it. Now, I don't think that Jesus is saying this in order to boost his own reputation or to feed his own ego. It's simply a statement of fact. Why is that? Well, I'm convinced that it's because Jesus is the unique **pattern of particularity** by which everyone who comes after him can understand in direct, practical terms what it means to serve God. The life of Jesus separates forever the difference between living a life of faithful service and the observing ceremonial man-made religious doctrines.

Here's what I'm getting at: Without the corrective force of the specific person, life, and ministry of Jesus it's possible for anyone to make God into whatever image we need God to be. Religion, you see, is different from Faith because religion is a creation of human beings. We can make it whatever we want it to be. If we don't have to deal with Jesus, the nature and will of God can be a matter of pure speculation or social expedience. In the 1930s, for instance, in Nazi Germany distinguished and respected leaders of the Christian Church said, "God is an abstract principle representing the highest and best aspirations of the German people. God is the head of the Aryan Super race. God stands with us to fulfill the destiny of the Third Reich—to subdue and conquer the inferior peoples of the world, eradicating their genetic pollution forever from the earth." Amazingly 90 percent of the German clergy went right along with the idea that God is essentially a Nazi! With no Jesus to deal with—no concrete pattern of compassion and justice—do you see what happens? We can create a religion of hate and violence—all in the name of God. When we do that, Jesus is trying to tell us, the whole house comes tumbling down, crushing everything and everyone in sight.

Do you know anything about Shintoism? In Japan, a form of Buddhism grew up in which some essentially good human characteristics—reverence, obedience, and respect—were transferred from religious observance to a deification of the State. The rulers were the sole proprietors of a genealogical heritage through which our ancestors are guiding their children's lives and fortunes. The whole notion was that the Emperor himself was divine and should be followed without question, no matter what. Christians in Japan were arrested when they spoke up to challenge such a distorted understanding of God. Millions of "rising sun" flags were distributed through religious institutions. Religion became virtually synonymous with the Empire of Japan. As political ambition and adventures mounted into World War there was no standard against which to criticize or evaluate. People turned into puppets and kamikaze pilots. The whole building came crashing down. Japan had to be defeated and humiliated before reason and reality returned.

There are those who see that same sort of danger arising these days right here in our own country—the development of a kind of "American Shintoism." While I don't want to get into political or social debate, it is a danger we need to be aware of and to guard against. There are strong signs these days of a growing trend to wrap political agendas in the Stars and Stripes. While we need to be loyal to our nation, we cannot be uncritical cheerleaders who fail to question and challenge government until we get sound and satisfying answers. Whenever we replace the specific pattern of Jesus in favor of a vacuous, tepid "spirituality" we're on a slippery slope indeed. It's a

trend that can lead us to accept all sorts of injustice and untruth on the grounds that “We need to get behind our leaders.” Without some clear standards of judgment we wind up failing in our responsibility to question all sorts of governmental, social, and environmental practices that, in the name of God, need to be challenged and changed.

It has been observed that, having been made in the image of God, we human beings have, ever since, been doing our best to return the favor—making up gods in various images of ourselves. We made up a god who is huge and vague—whose powers and prestige we can use to promote whatever causes we happen to choose or prefer. BUT, along comes Jesus to spoil our party....Jesus with his particularity....Jesus who just isn't as flexible and pliable as our own fickle imagination would like him to be.

Christians are people who see in Jesus, this humble but demanding Jewish enigma from the First Century, all of God that we will ever hope to see. On his shoulders rests the absolute and unfailing pattern that shows us exactly what it means to live responsible, faithful lives. Against his own witness of honesty and integrity, everything else either stands or falls—is validated or unmasked as falsehood.

Now, you can recognize and accept Jesus as the word of God in human form or you can reject him as a hopeless dreamer but the point is this: you can't make him into anything that you like. Though sometimes we might wish that we knew a whole lot more about this man Jesus—more of what he said and what he did, I can assure you that most of the time we would prefer it if we knew a whole lot less! By the standards of Jesus, we all fall short. By knowing and applying the standards of Jesus, all of us are provided with a unique pattern of particularity that saves us from losing touch with reality. Without these troublesome particularities of Jesus, all of us are in danger of substituting for authentic religious faith the hot air of “spirituality” that so easily floats us off into never-never-land, never touching down anywhere, never making any demands on ourselves or others....leading us further away from God and into the darkness of competing self-interest. Only insofar as we look always to Jesus do we find the actual pattern that keeps us focused and firmly grounded. Take away Jesus and it all falls apart.

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So, once again, we find in this “hard saying” from Jesus what I consider a crucially important and positive insight. It tells us that we have a real treasure in the biblical record through which Jesus shows us in specific detailed everyday terms exactly what it means to live and serve God.

As someone has pointed out, **The problem with the Christian Faith is not that it's been tried and found wanting. Rather, it's that it's been found difficult and, therefore, not tried.**

In the remaining days of this Lent, may God guide and direct our thoughts that we might become more and more filled with the wisdom, courage, integrity, and devotion of Jesus who is the example and pattern for us all.