

"Hold the Line"

Text: Matthew 21:33-44

2 John 1:2-3 *"Because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever: ³ Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love."*
Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Described by many architects as the most perfect building in the world, the Parthenon has been sitting atop the Acropolis in Athens, Greece for nearly 2500 years. That means it was there when the Apostle Paul visited the city and had his discussion with the philosophers who regularly met there. You've no doubt seen many pictures of the building, with its 46 massive Doric and Ionic columns forming the outer wall. What you probably didn't know was that you weren't seeing what you thought you were seeing.

The ancient Greek builders were masters of their trade. In fact the full extent of their genius wasn't discovered until centuries later (in 1832) when workers decided to try to repair some of the damage wrought by centuries of war and pollution. To all but the original builders, the columns that surround the structure look perfectly parallel and vertical, tapering slightly at the top. They were made from massive round carved stones set one atop the other, each appearing uniform to the one below it (except where they taper near the top). In other words, the columns look like you could take the bottom two-thirds of every column apart and reconstruct them in any order and the columns would still look the same. Yet the Greek masters knew that parallel lines create the optical illusion of bowing outward from each other. In other words, if you were to draw two very long parallel vertical lines on a piece of paper, they would appear to be farther apart in the middle than at the top and bottom. To correct this optical illusion, the columns in the Parthenon were actually made wider in the middle than at the bottom, an architectural technique known as entasis. The difference is so subtle that it is undetectable by the untrained human eye, but the fact remains that that which looks straight, isn't. Nor were the columns perfectly vertical. Each actually leans precisely inward, so that if you were to extend the columns upward they would all meet at a point one mile above the earth's surface. And this building was constructed hundreds of years before the birth of Christ!

The point for us this morning is that those philosophers that debated with Paul – those men so enamored with their own knowledge and wisdom - would undoubtedly accept the columns as straight, even while they were deriding Paul and his teaching about Jesus Christ as crooked and perverse.

The lesson, of course, is that man (who invariably trusts his own eyes and ideas) cannot be trusted to know straight from crooked.

We will hear more about such things in our text for this morning – another example of man's natural tendency to confuse straight with crooked. The text that will guide us in our meditation is found in the 21st Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

ESV **Matthew 21:33-44** *"Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." ⁴² ¶ 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 marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."*

These are the verbally inspired words of our God. Far from silly or ridiculous, these are the very words of life eternal, and by them we seek to have the lines of our thoughts and inclinations redrawn according to God's master plan. That our God would grant us such great gifts this morning through the study of these words, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

The opening verses of our text are obviously a parable. A parable has been described as a human story that teaches a divine lesson. It also bears repeating that parables were intended to teach *one central truth*. That means we are supposed to discover and learn that truth and to resist the temptation to make doctrine from the other elements in the parable. Parables taught one central truth, but they taught it in such a way that, although memorable, the one who spoke the parable could not be condemned for what he taught.

In our text, for example, the Jews knew that Jesus was talking about them, but because he taught in a parable there was little they could do about it. In the verse following our text we read: **"Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them."** Only Jesus didn't mention the Jews, did he? He told a story. It was the Jewish leaders themselves who filled in their own names – who recognized their own place in the parable. In effect they condemned themselves. They were the ones who had killed God's prophets down through the ages. They were the ones who would one day kill **"the heir"** – which of course was Jesus himself. But, again, Jesus never said as much. His words simply gave them the means to condemn themselves, which they did, but they hated him for it.

Jesus also wants you here today to find your role in this parable. So where do you and I fit in? Where do we find ourselves? We are those who have inherited the "vineyard" after the original workers were condemned and cast out, and that group includes every single human being that believes that Jesus Christ has supplied the sum total of all good necessary to pay in full the entire world's sin debt.

But there is another element in our text that is often repeated and seldom examined: Jesus as cornerstone. It is on that that we focus our attention this morning.

Ancient builders knew that a building was only as good as its cornerstone. Why? Because in ancient construction the cornerstone set the lines and angles for the entire building. That means that if the cornerstone was not perfectly square on every single one of its sides and angles, everything that would come after (based on that stone) would be off. It's no wonder that master builders were obsessive about their cornerstones. Great buildings could only come from perfect cornerstones.

Go back for a minute to those philosophers that debated with Paul on Mars Hill. Those wise men of Athens (members of the culture renowned the world over for their building prowess) badly misjudged Paul and the Savior he represented. Their human eye told them that Jesus was just "off" somehow. He didn't line up with what they believed to be true and right. You recall the conversation they had with Paul about Jesus. They were interested in what Paul had to say right up until he said something that didn't square with their idea of true and real. Paul is speaking first here: **"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them.** Acts 17:30-33

You obviously caught the part with which they had insurmountable problems – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That part just didn't line up for them. No one rose from the dead – as evidenced by the "fact" that they had never *seen* anyone rise from the dead. Nor had anyone ever spoken of something like this, so they dismissed Paul's words as rantings of a zealot rather than the straight lines of truth. How those same men could wish now that they had not done so.

On a daily basis we need to be reminded that God is the only one who can rightly determine what is straight and what is crooked. Man's opinions, wisdom, knowledge and experience do not equip him to make such determinations. There are "illusions" in life – optical and otherwise. There are things that *seem* straight and right, but are not. In fact much of God's Word simply does not line up with man's wisdom and experience, starting with the gospel itself. Human wisdom tells us that a Creator-God would never punish himself for the sins of his own creation. In man's estimation, the gods are very human-like, and therefore they act and react as we do. If mortals are bad, the gods punish them. If mortals are good, the gods reward them. Again, this is exactly why every single man-made religion teaches work-righteousness. Man must earn his way into the good graces of his god and must somehow pave his own road to heaven through his own goodness. Christianity alone teaches that all of what we naturally thought to be "good" was actually repulsive in God's sight, and that another had to supply the righteousness that we required. This is the gift that Jesus gave us.

So it was that the **"builders"** (mortal man) rejected Jesus as the cornerstone who could "form the lines" for the one true religion. When they looked at him they saw a man who just didn't line up with what they had come to believe. His teachings, in their eyes, made no earthly sense.

Sound familiar? As Jesus himself often foretold, Christians today receive the exact same treatment. In fact the modern vitriol and hatred for true Christianity is as puzzling as it is alarming – but only if and where Christians actually hold the line. The world doesn't object to artificial or superficial Christians. Their hatred is reserved for those who actually cling to all of the teachings of Jesus Christ. That's also why the world hates true Christianity and yet gives a pass to a shabby, repressive, work-righteous religion like Islam. Ask the question a little differently and the answer becomes apparent: *Why did the world hate Jesus?*

Really stop to consider the question for a moment. What could the people of the world possibly have against a man who was obviously so good – one who had broken no laws, harmed no one, and threatened no one's personal safety? Why would they hate a man who wouldn't even

defend himself against their accusations, let alone retaliate? Why such animosity toward one who spent his life trying to help, comfort, and save all those with whom he came into contact. There can be only one explanation: they hated him because they themselves were instruments of Satan. The devil "draws the lines" for the godless, and the devil hates all that is straight and good and true.

Nothing much has changed. Christians today seek to reflect Christ's love and are hated for it. The godless still today – with ever more obvious boldness – confuse straight with crooked and crooked with straight. And today it runs far deeper than the obvious sins of the flesh. Today the trend is actually toward *denying* an individual his right to teach and believe in line with the Chief Cornerstone. The only form of "Christianity" that is embraced is that which does not draw its lines from Jesus alone. In other words, you can be a Christian today if you don't really teach and believe as Christ did. You will be accepted only if you adopt the notion that "Biblical truth is evolving" and that absolutes of right and wrong shift and change over time. What once may have been a sin for our grandparents is no longer wrong because truth has evolved. Worse still is when they twist and pervert the words of Jesus himself to condone and promote their crookedness. Solomon spoke of this when he wrote in Proverbs 29: ***"An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked."***

What does all of this mean in practical, day-to-day terms? It means that you will be tempted on a daily basis to cut yourself free from the lines set by God's Word, and to follow the devil's lines to your own destruction. It means that you will be tempted to accept the idea that sin is now acceptable, and that living as a true and honorable man or woman of God is outdated and wholly unnecessary.

It also means that the need is greater now than ever before to return *daily* to that Cornerstone and to there have the lines of your faith and life redrawn or reconfirmed for you. "Christ as Cornerstone" means that you and I need to examine our walk moment by moment on the basis of God's truth – which is the only sure, certain way to know that we haven't wandered from the lines he has indelibly drawn for us. This is the real meaning behind Joshua's great proclamation: ***"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!"*** At times that path will seem crooked and misdirected. At times you will feel outdated, out of step, alienated from what the world sees as normal and right. So be it. Our text reminds us that this same Cornerstone will one day crush all who have rejected him. Hold fast instead to Solomon's words in Proverbs 3: ***"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."*** Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 5:1-7** Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

^{ESV} **Philippians 3:4b-14** If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² ¶ Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Michael Roehl, Pastor Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost – October 8, 2017

The Opening Hymn – 8 (Red Hymnal)

"Father Who the Light This Day"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 5:1-7) In our first lesson God, through the Prophet Isaiah, compares Israel to a carefully constructed vineyard that inexplicably produced "bad fruit." Israel had every advantage, and yet they turned from their God and were cast out. The same warning could and should be sounded in our own streets today, for what nation or people has ever been blessed like ours? What, however, have we done with that blessing?

Psalms 23 (Supplement page 36) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson (Philippians 3:4b-14) The Apostle Paul didn't just talk the talk; he obviously also walked the walk of the Christian faith. This is not just how Christians act; it is what Christians *are*. Our one great irreplaceable possession in this life is the knowledge or trust that Jesus Christ has paid our sin debt and that we stand holy and righteous in God's sight because of what Jesus has done for us. While Christians struggle to walk always in harmony with God's will, that is a struggle that will continue for each of us until we are called home. God help us all.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed (Supplement page 5)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 349 (Stanzas 1-3, 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Thy Boundless Love to Me"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 21:33-44 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Hold the Line"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 349 (Stanzas 6-7) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Thy Boundless Love to Me"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 53 (Stanzas 1-2, 6) (Red Hymnal)

"Abide O Dearest Jesus"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (41) Average (41) August Mortgage Balance (\$33,453)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday school and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service w/ Holy Communion |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Fellowship and coffee time |
| Wednesday | -6:00 p.m. | – Confirmation Class |
| | -7:00 p.m. | – Midweek Bible Study |
| Saturday | -9:00 a.m. | – Work day at church |
| Next Sunday | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday school and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Sunday Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship and coffee time |

CLC News – Pastor David Schaller is considering the call to Immanuel of Mankato. A summary the recent CLC Coordinating Conference is available on the entry table. A full report of is also available from Pastor Roehl.

Church Work Day – A fall work day has been scheduled for next Saturday, October 14, beginning at 9:00 a.m. For more information please see Trustee Coordinator Brian Fettig.

Volunteer Needed for Web Site – St Paul is looking for a volunteer to do a substantial revision and update of our church website – which has not been substantially revised since it was created over ten years ago. Anyone with expertise in that area, please speak to Council President Mark Johnson or to Pastor Roehl.

Griffen Fettig's Address – Griffen Fettig is currently in basic training and would certainly appreciate a note of encouragement. His address is posted on the bulletin board. It must be addressed exactly as it appears there.