

**Stanford Memorial Church**  
**October 2, 2005**

**RECOVERING REJECTED STONES**  
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**Psalter Lesson: Psalm 19**  
**Gospel Lesson: Matthew 21.33-46**

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the head cornerstone” (Matt. 21.42b). If the popular urban myth associated with the founding of Stanford University were true, then we should nominate this verse as the official scriptural reference for placement here in Memorial Church. It would be carved in stone and takes its place along with the many other verses and quotations collected and commissioned by Jane Stanford. It seems timely, as we stand on the threshold of a new academic year, to repeat the oft-told tale—perhaps there may even be a few here who have not heard it before. According to one of the more popular versions, a shabbily dressed little man and woman called on the president of Harvard. They inquire about contributing a significant memorial in memory of their only child, a son who died tragically at too early an age, just a few months earlier. Ostensibly, the president quickly surmises these country bumpkins are out of their league and decides to bring this intrusion to a quick conclusion by informing them that the value of Harvard University at this time probably exceeds 5 million dollars (today he might also allude to their 25 billion dollar endowment). At this point the woman purportedly turns to her husband and exclaims, “Well my dear, if that’s all it costs we can build our own university.” Lo and behold, the stone which Harvard rejected becomes Leland Stanford, Jr. University.

While this story contains a seed of truth, it is, like so many urban legends, eclipsed by a bushel of apocryphal fantasy. Leland and Jane Stanford did visit Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard, whom the Stanfords knew personally—just as they also knew the presidents of Yale and Johns Hopkins. But you may be sure the Stanfords were quite eloquently dressed and would hardly have been dismissed as country bumpkins. In point of fact, whenever they ventured into a new area—whether breeding champion race horses or establishing a university—they consulted the top people in the field. What better person to interview for establishing a university than the president of Harvard?

It might be said, in our scripture lesson for today, that Jesus too was engaged with the leaders—in this case the religious authorities—of his day. Just a couple of days prior to the interchange read as our gospel lesson, Jesus had made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a colt and surrounded with mobs of people waving palm branches and crying, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heavens!”(Matt. 21.9) . . . the Messiah has arrived. The ruling religious junta observing this spontaneous outburst, rather than joining in the praise and excitement, react more with shock and alarm. They readily perceive a threat to their power and standing. In the back of their minds there is also the awareness that this

disturbance might unduly arouse their Roman conquerors, who could step in at any minute and wreak havoc on everyone.

Then, as if to compound their threat and escalate their anger, Jesus enters the temple and overturns the tables of the money changers and drives out the merchants who sold doves for sacrifices. Now Jesus threatened their financial realm as well. Moments later he heals the blind and the lame, which only intensified the enthusiasm of those crowded about him. Out of frustration and fury the religious leaders chastise Jesus for allowing the people to get so agitated, but they refrain from any physical action, fearing the eruption of a riot from the crowd which would sweep them all away.

Our gospel lesson takes place precisely within this electrified atmosphere—Jesus and his ecstatic followers on one side and the religious leaders with their attendants on the other. As he often did when pressed by the religious authorities to explain himself, Jesus tells a parable. A landowner leases out his vineyard estate and moves abroad. Following the harvest, when the owner expects to receive his agreed-upon payment from the tenants, nothing is forthcoming. So he sends a slave to collect the rent. The tenants reason that if they kill the slave that will be the end of it, and they can claim the land. Next the landowner sends a group of slaves, and they meet the same fate. Ultimately, the owner sends his son, thinking the tenants will surely honor him. But they do not and he too is put to death. Jesus concludes the parable by saying, the landlord will come and “put those wretches to a miserable death” (Matt. 21.40), and the vineyards will be leased to other tenants who will honor their responsibility to the landlord. He then concludes by quoting a passage from the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the lord’s doing, and it is amazing our eyes” (Ps. 118.22,23).

The religious leaders did not have to read *Religion for Dummies*. They knew Jesus was talking about them. Subtlety went out the window when he told them to their face. But they could not hear. They could not see. They had convinced themselves that their cornerstone of religion was true and impregnable. Even the God they proclaimed and worshipped could not break through their hardened and self-serving spirits. Rendered obtuse by their certainty, they had, in effect, convinced one another that the owner of the vineyard has become dispensable. Rather than a being enlivened by the Spirit, they preferred to try and possess the Spirit. They failed to perceive that the absentee landlord stood before them, that Jesus, the about-to-be rejected stone, would become the chief cornerstone which would demolish and replace what they had assume to be invincible and unassailable.

But are these presumptuous tenants really so very different from ourselves? We too cling to our little cornerstones of apparent certainty and invulnerability. If we can accumulate enough knowledge, if we can garner enough recognition, if we can put together the perfect family, if we can amass enough wealth—then the vineyard will be ours. Who needs the absentee landlord? Well . . . there may be a few cracks here and there. Like there seems to be fewer of us who have lots and more of those who have little or nothing. Or, why is it that so many of us who ostensibly have so much also have such

a high rate of alcoholism and drug abuse, suicides, interpersonal abuse, mental and marital breakdowns—or just a pervasive sense of unfulfilment?

This scripture lesson serves as a wake-up call to revisit some of our rejected stones, which have the potential to become significant fulfilling cornerstones in our lives. One group that should catch our attention has to do with the exercise of justice and compassion, particularly in the area of health care. Here in the United States we have the unique distinction of having a health care system which is both outstanding while bordering on the edge of being dysfunctional. During the 1990s, for example, health care per capita spending, even with managed care and government efforts to curtail costs, grew more rapidly in the U.S. than in the average industrialized country. By 1997 we were spending \$3,925 per capita for health care, the highest level in the world, with Switzerland, the second highest, being \$2,547, which is 35% less. Presumably we lead the world in medical education and research, yet we undermine ourselves by federally mandated restrictions on stem cell research, which appears to be based on the mistaken belief that here is a connection between abortions and obtaining the basic material for stem cell research. In reality, ample tissue for stem cell research may be obtained without drawing upon aborted fetuses. The same fundamentalist thinking that condemns stem research also attacks any state which seeks to pass right to die legislation, mischaracterizing it as assisted suicide. Yet when polls are taken, asking people if they prefer to die with dignity and care, when they are no longer able to sustain life on their own, or to have their condition sustained by artificial life support systems, the vast majority opts for the right to die with dignity. The absurdity of our understanding of this issue was underscored by the much publicized Terry Schiabo situation with congress meeting in a special session and the president flying to the White House at midnight to sign a bill pertaining to one individual, while 40 million Americans have no health care coverage at all. One of the great ironies of our health care system is that in spite of spending more per capita than any other country, several other nations have a higher life expectancy rate than we, and our infant mortality rate is among the highest in the world.

In cities across the country we see the rejected stones of our health care system. We call them the homeless. In California their number exploded during the 1970s and 80s when one of the model mental health care systems in the nation was dismantled and patients were sent out to fend for themselves. The plight and prevalence of such suffering has been accentuated by the horrendous devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

According to a recent news release, Hillory Clinton and Newt Gingrich—talk about a marriage not made in heaven—are working on health care reform. Perhaps, with the tragedies of Katrina and Rita looming in the background, the time has come to recognize the necessity for a nationally coordinated response to our health care needs, that we can restore a rejected cornerstone which will sustain health care for every man and woman and child in the United States.

A second cornerstone badly in need of restoration is that of education. One of the basic tenets of the Reformation was that individuals should be able to read the Bible for themselves, rather than have a church-designated expert interpret it for them. Out of this

conviction flowed a mighty stream of universal education. Education was recognized as a right, not a privilege.

At the conclusion of World War II one of the most insightful things our country ever did was to authorize a G.I. education bill for our veterans to subsidize their college education. These men and women brought our country to a new level of excellence. What a return on our investment, as the middle class expanded, industries blossomed, while technology and research made exponential gains. This understanding of what education was all about hit home for me during the 1960s when I served as a pastor in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. Like most suburbs of the time, there were lots of children in Broomfield and lots of educational needs. Ed and Gladys Gibbons, a retired couple in my congregation, had been unable to have children. Ed had worked his way up in a railway company. One election season, when the usual school bond issues appeared on the ballot, Ed said to me, "You know George, even though we have no children, Gladys and I always vote for every educational bond issue, because we believe this is the greatest investment we can make in our community and our country." They recognized the truth that ignorance is more costly than education.

Yet today the cornerstone of education seems to be getting chipped away more than ever. Since the passage of proposition 13 in California our public schools have gone from being rated among the top five states in the country to being listed among the bottom five. California is now 44<sup>th</sup> in the country in the amount of money we spend per student in our schools, while we lead the nation in the amount of money we spend on prisons. Ignorance is more costly than education. Year after year we seem to be dismantling what is probably the greatest asset our state possesses, the vast complex of the University of California.

Hopefully, we will more actively restore the cornerstone of education as we heed the wisdom of individuals such as Stanley Litow, head of the IBM Foundation, who recently declared, "Over a quarter-million math and science teachers are needed . . . that is like a ticking time bomb not just for technology companies, but for business and the U. S. economy." IBM is putting their money where their mouth is by offering to subsidize employees who leave to become schoolteachers. That's a start to rehabilitating the rejected cornerstone of education.

A third cornerstone badly in need of recovery has to do with preserving our environment. In the biblical narrative, God created the world and saw that it was good. Men and women were placed within in to tend it and care for it. For millenniums we have looked upon this creation as an inexhaustible resource which we could exploit as we saw fit. If we cut down all the trees on this hill and need more wood, then we cut the trees on the next hill. Of course this world no longer exists. With the population explosion, the increasing demands of expanding industries, and the international desire to emulate a higher standard of living which accelerates the use and abuse of nature resources, the demand is in the process of vastly exceeding the available supply. As glacial fields melt at an alarming rate, the ozone becomes more depleted, and rising water temperatures in the Caribbean contribute to the destructiveness of hurricanes, the reality

of global warming becomes increasingly evident and undeniable. In June of this year, the Association of British Insurers issued a report forecasting that, owing to climate change, losses from hurricanes in the U.S., typhoons in Japan, and windstorms in Europe were likely to increase by more than sixty percent in the coming decades (New Yorker, 9/19/05).

It appears that the need for preserving the indispensable cornerstone of our environment is becoming increasingly recognized. In March, 2001, 140 nations gathered to ratify the Kyoto Protocol which attempts to implement agreements and actions to restore, preserve and protect our environment. Unfortunately, the United States, which produces nearly a quarter of the world's green-house-gas emissions, refused to sign the Kyoto protocol. Perhaps our recently initiated Stanford Global Climate and Energy Project can help us recognize the urgency and necessity of sustaining this indispensable cornerstone of our existence.

In point of fact, restoring cornerstones is a heritage woven into the very fabric of this great country in which we are privileged to live. A lot of rejected cornerstones play rather significant roles in our establishment and early history. Some groups, such as the Baptists, Puritans and Quakers were escaping persecution. Several other early immigrants faced the dilemma of either going to this unknown new country or to a known debtor's prison. Then there were the Chinese, the Irish, the Italians and Scots—along with a good many others—who left their homes because of bad economic conditions. Many African American suffered an exceptional experience; they had little voice in the matter since they were kidnapped and sold as slaves. But the stones rejected by Europe, Asia, Africa emerged, after four and a half centuries, as the cornerstone of the world's super power.

Interesting enough, we also stand at a significant and infrequent historical juncture as the three great monotheistic religions of the world are in the process of observing some of the most significant rituals in their traditions. Muslims are on the threshold of celebrating the very holy month of Ramadan, while Jews will be initiating the celebration of the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the Christian tradition, today is commemorated as World Wide Communion Sunday. What an opportunity to affirm that the cornerstones we have in common—to claim and to affirm--are so much more fundamental and indispensable than the pebbles that divide us. Amen.