

## **“Recognizing the Real Deal” (Gospel of Luke Series)**

Luke 20:1-19

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First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu

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Well here we are the week after Easter, but today’s Scripture takes us back to the Tuesday of Holy Week, just three days before Jesus was crucified.

And although we know “the rest of the story,” how three days after He went to the cross Jesus conquered death and sin... it’s illustrative to look back on the circumstances that resulted in his execution. Our story starts in the first verse of the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke’s gospel:

*One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. <sup>2</sup> “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,” they said. “Who gave you this authority?”*

*<sup>3</sup> He replied, “I will also ask you a question. Tell me: <sup>4</sup> John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin?”*

*<sup>5</sup> They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Why didn’t you believe him?’ <sup>6</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.”*

*<sup>7</sup> So they answered, “We don’t know where it was from.”*

*<sup>8</sup> Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”*

Jesus then goes on to tell what has become known as The Parable of the Tenants:

*“A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. <sup>10</sup> At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>11</sup> He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. <sup>12</sup> He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.*

*<sup>13</sup> “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do?*

*I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’*

*<sup>14</sup> “But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ <sup>15</sup> So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

So unlike many parables that can take a bit of unraveling, this one is pretty clear as to who’s who. The man who planted the vineyard represents God, the tenants are the Jewish leaders into whose care God has entrusted his vineyard, which is Israel. The unheeded messengers who were sent away are the prophets who forewarned the stewards of God’s kingdom. The son

represents Jesus, who is recognized as the true heir to the owner, and as a result he's brutally killed and discarded.

God's reaction:

"What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? <sup>16</sup> He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

Well there's a nice little pleasant parable to follow on the heels of our triumphant Easter lesson of last week!

So the passage we just read promises God's severe judgment on those who reject the Son, and we pick it back up in verse 16 with Jesus continuing: [slide 7]:  
When the people heard this, they said, "God forbid!"

In the Greek they literally said "*Me Gennita*," the strongest negative statement in the Greek language, which literally means "May it never happen." [end slide 7]

Now why would the crowd react that way? Wouldn't it make more sense for crowd to agree with Jesus that killing the wicked tenants would be the just thing to do?

But suppose the crowd was not referring to the punishment of the tenants, but rather may it never happen that the son would be killed...

<sup>17</sup> Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? <sup>1</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

<sup>19</sup> The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

Maybe you're like me and are thinking "Well Duh.....! What does it take for these Jewish leaders to get the picture?

I mean, we'd recognize Jesus right away as the Messiah, wuldn't we?

I mean, we'd recognize right away that He embodied the authority of God the Father, right?

I mean, we wouldn't reject the cornerstone would we?

Would we?

So in my message this morning I want to focus on two questions:

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The first is... **“If He were right here in our midst, would we recognize Jesus as the genuine Son of God, the Lord of the universe and the Lord of our lives and what would it take to convince us of His authority to claim as much?”**

And the second question is, **“Like the Pharisees, the elders, and chief priests in our reading... have we rejected the cornerstone of our faith?”**

Maybe we should start by asking what **are** the cornerstones of our faith?

Seven of our staff members are studying to be Commissioned Ruling Elders, the Presbyterian equivalent of a lay pastor. For months we’ve been deeply immersed in the Bible, the Book of Confessions, the Tenets of the Reformed Faith, Calvin’s Institutes, systematic theology, and so on. So I’m feeling like I have some pretty solid authority to answer that question in the next 45 minutes... Just kidding...

Instead, I turned to the bedrock foundational elements that Auntie Karen uses with our keiki in the Children’s Ministry program downstairs. By the way, if you’ve never been down there you ought to check it out. It’s a very special place: they’re making tomorrow!

- By the time they are 3 years old, every toddler in our keiki program will begin to know who God is and that He loves them.
- As preschoolers, by the time they’re 5 they’ll discover that Jesus loves them and wants them to be kind, good and loving just like Jesus.
- By the time they finish 6<sup>th</sup> grade they’ll discover that the Bible is true and was written for us today.
- And they’ll be able to recognize sin and understand that it separates us from God. Each week they’re taught from scripture how to make the right choices and how to share their faith!

We feel so strongly about these foundations that on our church’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary we formally commissioned our Ko’olau Kids to ask the question, on our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, “Is it still about these foundational truths?” ... “Is it still about Jesus?”

In fact, they each got a letter that their parents are safeguarding, asking them to do just that. The original is in a time capsule that is behind the CORNERSTONE of our original sanctuary, located in the memorial wall just outside the sanctuary door. (A picture of the FPC cornerstone was shown.)

These same core beliefs are captured in our mission statement: that as a church we strive “to love God, love people, and reach the world for Christ.”

But somewhere along the way, these fundamentals get lost in the background noise of the world, they get lost in our focus on false gods rather than the one true God, and they get lost in our resistance to surrendering our will to His will.

This morning's passage goes right for the jugular of "religious people," those who spend a lot of time going through the motions while missing the Messiah right in their midst.

I bet most of you would say you've never heard of Norman Selby... He was the American [welterweight](#) boxing champion from 1898–1900. No one is quite sure why he fought under an assumed name, but like Cassius Clay changing his name to Mohammed Ali, Selby became known as [Kid McCoy](#). (A picture of Kid McCoy was shown.)

It might have been because he was married eight times, or served nine years in prison for the murder of a married lover...

He was a very colorful character, and once the bell rang, he was terrifying and merciless to his opponents...

But outside the ring he looked very mild-mannered. So much so that people frequently refused to believe he was who he said he was.

The story goes that one time he walked into a saloon with his father who said to the bartender "Can you bring some drinks for my son, The Champ, Kid McKoy?"

The bartender didn't believe him and asked him to prove it. His father assured the barkeep that this was his son, the famous welterweight champion Kid McCoy, but the bartender and two by-standers, all of whom claimed to be boxing aficionados, chided and insulted them saying there was no way, that he was just a look-alike pretender...

Three punches later all three of them were flat on their faces in the sawdust on the barroom floor.

Such repeated demonstrations that he was the real fighter and not a look-alike created many legends. And as a result, even to this day, a person indisputably the authentic article is now commonly referred to as "the real McCoy."

In like manner, the Jewish religious people in today's reading didn't recognize that Jesus was the real deal. And through the parable of the tenants Jesus challenges us to examine whether we have thrown out the foundational truth while going through the motions of being religious;... he asks us whether we have rejected the cornerstone...

In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John, the Pharisees similarly question Jesus' authority after he healed a cripple at the pool of Bethesda. Incredibly, they were even more concerned that He had healed on the Sabbath!

I like the way The Message captures verses 39 and 40 when Jesus answers them:

*"You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures... are all about **me**! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.*

You see, the Pharisees (and the Scribes, whom Jesus also holds in contempt), regarded the Scriptures with such esteem that they thought just studying them would lead to eternal life.

So much so that in copying Scripture, the Scribes weren't allowed to copy more than **one letter** without referring back to the original text!

[As an aside that's really great for us because the holy books that have been handed down to us are amazingly accurate, more so than any other books of antiquity.]

But it underscores a fundamental fallacy in their approach to faith: the books themselves were believed to give eternal life, overlooking the God they described; overlooking the fulfillment in the Messiah they described... the real deal... the Real McCoy... standing right in front of them.

Lest we chime in with "Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees," it's worth asking ourselves if we just as easily overlook Jesus in the midst of our zeal for religious studies and spiritual practices...

I was a Naval Supply Corps Officer for 26 years. One of the duties of a Naval Supply Officer is paymaster, and in the 70's, we were responsible for conducting payday, twice a month, in actual cash. Remember there were no ATM's in those days...

But a cash payday means on a carrier you carry more than \$5 million in cash and blank US Government checks that any bank in the world will cash for any amount!

Anyway, for obvious reasons we had to be cautious about counterfeit dollars, especially when we cashed checks overseas.

We received a lot of instruction on this topic. But the interesting thing is we weren't trained to recognize counterfeit bills... we were taught how to recognize the genuine dollars, the real thing, which would make the counterfeits all that more obvious.

And if the Pharisees had been trained in a similar fashion, it would have been obvious that the authentic Son of God was in their midst.

Don't get me wrong: getting into the Word is important, to be sure. But it's even more crucial for the Word to get into us.

Because if we can't **first** recognize that Jesus **is** the Word made flesh... how are we going to believe what He said...

Jesus infuriated the Jewish leaders because He claimed to be the "stone which the builders rejected." This is a reference to the building of Solomon's Temple.

It took 30,000 workmen over seven years to complete the temple. According to I Kings chapter 6 all the stones were quarried far away from the building site, so there was no sound of hammering heard there.

Jewish tradition says one day the building superintendent saw an unusual stone being delivered. Because it was cut in an odd shape, he thought it was flawed. He had it rolled away into the nearby Kidron Valley where it lay untouched and unnoticed.

You might be thinking “Get out... how could they **not** recognize it might be an important stone?” Well, last year Angela and I were in Burgundy and we visited a place called Guedelon where they are constructing a medieval castle from scratch.

I was fascinated watching the masons extract and carve blocks of stone from the bedrock. There were blocks and pieces everywhere, with many shapes and even rejected blocks that were flawed. I could imagine that with a huge project like Solomon’s temple, where the stones were cut at a remote location, where 30,000 workmen were involved in the project... that it would be very easy to get confused, and reject a piece that looked like it didn’t fit.

Years later, the builder of the Temple sent word to the quarry that he was ready for the main corner stone. The quarry master came and reported, “Why, I had that stone delivered years ago. When they began to search they discovered the discarded stone in the valley was the main cornerstone. It was covered with debris and moss.

It took many men working hard to raise the massive stone out of the valley. When they raised it and set it, it fit perfectly! The chief cornerstone was the very rock they had rejected.

Jesus is that Rock. In our passage the Jews were on the verge of rejecting God’s chief cornerstone—He didn’t fit their concept of the Messiah... despite all their studying Scripture they didn’t know how to differentiate the authentic from the counterfeit...there was no way He was the Real McCoy... and they would crucify Him. But God was going to exalt Jesus by raising Him from the dead. And **this** is the Good News that we celebrated last week in our Easter service, and that we should carry as the cornerstone of our heart and our lives.

So this morning I challenge you. I challenge you to be like little children. Discard your sophistication and the common world view that what God has to offer may seem unpopular today. Return to God’s foundational, cornerstone truths that are so simple even our Ko’olau Kids understand them and remember them:

- God knows you and loves you and wants a relationship with you
- Jesus loves you and wants you to be kind and loving to one another
- The Bible is true and was written for us today
- Sin separates us from God
- Jesus died so our sins can be erased and we can be restored in our relationship with God
- This is good news that we should share with the world

It can’t be stated any simpler than that. Amen? Amen. Let’s pray: Lord, we thank You for dying for our sins. We confess we often overlook You when You are right in our midst. We confess we focus on many things that are not as important as You. Please help us recognize You as the real deal, our one true Lord and Savior and Redeemer, our cornerstone, our Comforter, our all in all, Amen.