

***Cornerstone* – Matthew 21:33-46**

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I learned a new term this week. That term is “attention infidelity.” It means when a partner’s digital life intrudes on an in-person connection.

You know what this is referring to, right? When a married couple, for example, sits down together after dinner and instead of having a conversation, one of the two picks up his or her phone and starts scrolling. And the scrolling (here’s where the infidelity part comes into play) can include looking at things they shouldn’t be looking at in suggestive social media posts, but more often it is just the banal distraction of dead-eyed scrolling.

“Instead of reaching for each other,” said one author and researcher on the subject, “we snatch up our digital devices that flood us with an endless stream of hyper-curated content.”

This is part of a broader problem our culture faces, a problem that we’ve heard and read about and witnessed personally all around us.

The demographic known as Gen Z, the first generation that can’t remember a world without smartphones, participate less in “embodied social experiences” than their counterparts in every other generation. They’re less likely to work, go to church, attend parties, date or play sports, Cox notes. About half of teenagers describe themselves as “almost constantly” online. There is no other change that has occurred in the past few decades that would explain this unique decline.

Young people’s very online isolation, which was worsened by the Covid lockdown, means they have much less practice

interacting with new people and navigating the usual friction and established norms. This, Cox writes, has left them lonely, unmoored and distrustful of each other.

This technology, especially among this Gen Z generation, has orchestrated a lack of interpersonal connection that real conversations used to foster.

Human connection—one on one and in-person—is one of our foundational pieces or cornerstones to being human. That seems so obvious, and yet, technology is getting in the way of this, to the point where the term “attention infidelity” has come into our cultural lexicon.

There are certain people, beliefs, values, or ethics that are foundational or cornerstones of our lives, such as human connection. They might vary for each of us, but when the world is in chaos, we rely on them as best we can to get us through it.

I invite you to think back across your lived life and ponder what some of those cornerstones are and have been. They anchor us and keep us from drifting down paths that aren't right for us. They teach us how to behave when we are tempted to misbehave. They motivate us, maybe, to keep us going down the path we're called to when we really might be tempted to veer off.

Jesus follows his telling of this parable today with a recitation of a couple verses from Psalm 118. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

He references himself, of course, as the cornerstone and as one who foreshadows being rejected—by the scribes, by the Pharisees, by all who followed him really.

They rejected Jesus, the cornerstone.

As people of faith, we would hold Jesus to be one of those cornerstones in our lives, along with human connection, and the cornerstones unique to each of us. But, why is he a cornerstone?

John Calvin, one of the fathers of our church and founder of the Reformation in the 16th century, established what he called the three-fold office of Christ. The threefold office presents Jesus Christ as prophet, priest, and king, who in his saving work fulfilled all the anointed offices of the Old Testament. As Calvin pointed out, the threefold office of Christ is one of the best ways to explain our Lord's redemptive work, which by design overcame our ignorance, our guilt, and our corruption, and which even now provides us with illumination, redemption, and hope. It's one of the best ways to describe how he is the cornerstone of our faith.

As a king, Jesus is King of kings, and his kingdom is a kingdom both of grace and of power. He sits at the right hand of his father and even now rules over all of creation and his church.

As priest, Jesus' death was a sacrifice for our sins, guaranteeing everlasting life through his blood on the cross and eternal life through his resurrection. And also as a priest, he makes intercessions to the Father as an intermediary.

As a prophet, Jesus is and represents God to us. He came to show us the Father, to instruct us as to how we should act. In this parable today, Jesus comes out of the story with a lesson about how it is that we all should produce fruit like the tenants of the story who did not produce the fruit of the vineyard.

Producing good fruit is foundational to our lives as disciples, as dictated by the cornerstone of our faith.

This is a call on Jesus' part for accountability.

Roger Lovett, writing for *Pulpit Resource* magazine talks of accountability this way: *"Most of you who have jobs outside the home know what it is to constantly be held accountable for your work. Therefore, it seems strange indeed for us to come to church and expect no accountability. You know from firsthand experience how invigorating it is, how helpful to the quality of your work, how important it is for your own self-esteem to be held accountable, and to work for a boss who knows what you do."*

Throughout scripture it is a typical experience of having God's word intrude and ask simply, "What are you doing with what you have been given?"

Our God loves us enough not only to give us good gifts but also loves us enough to hold us to account for what we have been given. God loves us enough to love us, even in our sin, but God loves us more than enough so as not to leave us self-satisfied and smug in our sin.

There shall be that day, now or later, when we shall be held to account. The gospel itself demands it."

This parable Jesus shares is about accountability. It too is a cornerstone of our faith.

During our orientation for new members recently (we call them Chats with Matt here), we talked about some of the key tenants of Presbyterian belief. And one of them that has a tendency to make people's ears perk up is this: Presbyterians are more concerned about the glory of God and the coming of God's reign than we are about the salvation of souls.

When people hear that, a first reaction is to miss what is truly meant by that. It's not that we aren't concerned about the salvation of souls. (Of course we are and we trust that God is saving all of us one day at a time.) It's just that we believe that the kingdom of God is very much here and now as well as in

eternity. This world that God made and that God loves needs the attention of the church now. The world today is as precious to God as all of us who will one day inhabit the heavenly realm.

This means that we can't be passive. We must be active; we must be active in producing good fruit from the vineyard and sharing that nourishing fruit of peace and goodwill with the world.

On this World Communion Sunday, we receive the World Communion Offering. And making a gift to this offering is a statement about not being passive and not hoarding what is somebody else's to begin with. It is about giving to a cause that is all about action. If we are for peace in the world—true peace—we are about creating conditions and environments throughout our community and around the world that can help communities and individuals avoid the destructive paths of violence and conflict.

That's part of our producing fruit—it's a cornerstone of our faith.

Cornerstones don't easily crumble. When the rest of a building is falling down, it usually remains—steadfast, undeterred. We celebrate our cornerstones, the foundations that remain amid what seems like a collapsing world: Our interpersonal relationships with family, friends, and mentors, Jesus the Christ—our prophet, priest, and king, and the essential elements of our faith—including the actions that produce good fruit.