



CORNERSTONE

September 18, 2016, 18th Sunday after Pentecost, First 250th Anniversary Sunday
Isaiah 28:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; Matthew 7:24-25

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Theme: Christ alone is our cornerstone.

God of the journey past, God of the arriving, God of the journey before us, bless the words of sacred Scripture we've just heard, and bless my mere mortal words, that both might find a home in souls gathered here this day and somehow shape us more into the church, you call us to become. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

When folks join Brick, we invite them to attend three New Member Classes. I usually teach the third and last session, the Saturday morning class that focuses in on Brick Church specifically. Session one was Christianity 101; Session two was about Presbyterianism, but this one last one is all about our own congregation.

I usually offer a quick bit of Brick Church history. I try to highlight four aspects of our identity as a congregation that have been consistent over these last 250 years. I talk first about the central importance of worship, in our case traditional worship thoughtfully done. I next talk about Brick's emphasis on education, the education of children as well as adults. We have one of the largest urban Sunday School programs in the country. The roots of our Day School, 76 years old in its current iteration, actually go back to the early 19th Century. Thirdly, I talk about Brick's long history of reaching out to the needs of the city and world beyond our walls. Lastly, I reflect about how important community is to us – the formation of fellowship in this often lonely and atomizing city.



The 250th Anniversary Celebration Committee liked my quadchotomy of church life and decided to organize their plans for this next year around those four aspects of who we are as a congregation. They gave them one-word names that were actually incorporated into the logo that's on the cover of Order of Worship you were handed when you arrived today. "Worship, Fellowship, Education, and Ministry" – "Ministry" being the short-hand term for mission to the world beyond our walls as well as the care we offer to our own folks – "outreach" and "inreach" in Brick language. But "inreach and outreach" was too long for the logo.

The Celebration Committee then decided to use an architectural metaphor to describe this foursome of church life. They named them "*our four pillars.*" Everybody knows about pillars; we even have a pair of pillars on the front of the church building on Park Avenue. So the "*the four pillars*" they became. Indeed the four pillars of our church they are, but know this – *they are not the cornerstone. Pillars they may be, but the cornerstone they are not.*

If you wander around this building long enough and look hard enough, you'll find four cornerstones. There's the easy one outside of this building at the corner of Park and 91st. It simply reads "*Anno Domini 1938,*" the year construction of this sanctuary began. There's another one hidden behind a door in the breezeway between this building and the New Parish House that reads "*Yorkville Presbyterian Church A. D. 1856.*" That church and its building are long gone, the congregation folded into Brick Church many years ago. Then there are two more cornerstones out in the garden behind the Old Parish House, both rescued from Brick's two earlier buildings. One, that of our second building, is dated 1858; the other – that of our first building way downtown – is dated 1767. *Four cornerstones, but none of these pieces of stone are our cornerstone.*

All the Bible passages read in our service, the three that Pam just read and the one that formed our Call to Worship, all of them, make use of architectural metaphors. The Call to Worship, "*Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build labor in vain,*" is the beginning of Psalm 127. Incidentally, the traditional Latin contraction of that line, "*Nisi Dominus Frustra,*" is the motto often associated with Brick Church. Those Latin words are carved into the lintel over the Park Avenue door to



the Chapel. They're on our coat of arms and on the beautiful new flag flying out front.

The Old Testament passage that Pam read first, the one from Isaiah, has God promising a new foundation for people of faith. Isaiah has God promising to lay a "*precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.*" Christians naturally read those words as pointing toward Jesus Christ.

In the second reading, the one from the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul takes that very metaphor and makes the meaning only too clear. He's speaking to the Christians in Ephesus about the building up of the church. He calls it the "*dwelling place for God,*" and declares that "*Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone.*" *In Him,*" Paul says, "*the whole structure is joined together and grows...*"

And lastly in the Gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable that compares someone who has taken to heart the words he's just spoken in the Sermon on the Mount with a person who builds a house on rock. Of that edifice, Jesus says, "*The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall...*"

Truth is, when I selected these four readings, I had lots of similar choices to choose from. Again and again, Scripture declares that the foundation of life is trust in God or that the cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ.

My metaphorical point on this first 250th Anniversary Sunday is simply this: what we do as a congregation – the mission outreach and ministry inreach, the rich fellowship of this community, our adult studies and huge Sunday School and superb Day School, even this service of worship – *none of this is the cornerstone.* And the physical buildings we have built, this one and the ones before it, and for that matter the renovations to come, *none of this is the cornerstone.* Jesus Christ – and He alone – is the "*precious cornerstone.*" "*In Him the whole structure is joined together and grows.*" And know this: if He and His word be the Rock on



which we build this house, we can trust that when the rain falls and the floods come and the wind blows and beats against it, it will not fall.

As we commence this celebration of the 250th anniversary of this church we love, two temptations lie in our path. Both are seductive. Both are deadly.

The first temptation is to let the celebration of our history slip into something dangerously close to idolatry. Churches that worship their buildings are sometimes said to suffer from an “edifice complex.” But it’s every bit as vainglorious to worship your church *history* as it is to worship your church *building*. This lovely sanctuary was built to the glory of God, not to the glory of the builders. Just so, our long history was made to the glory of God, not to the glory of those who made it, much less to the glory of us who have merely inherited it.

Idolatry is the subtlest and wiliest of tempters. It’s not just money and status that we often fashion into idols – idols being any substitute for God. History and heritage can become idols. Ironically enough, even the church, even religion itself can morph into idols – substitutes for God. So as we do our remembering this next year, remember that the church we remember, the history we recall and the heritage we celebrate, are not the foundation. They are not the rock. They are not the cornerstone. Oh, they’re well worth remembering and celebrating, *but only if they point away from themselves, only if they point to the One is the Cornerstone.*

If a certain idolatry be the first temptation, the second temptation before us this next year is that – reveling in the past and enjoying the present – we neglect the future. I’ve said it before, I say it now, and I’ll doubtless say it in the future – the main reason to remember the past is for the sake of the future.

As Kevin Greene reminded us at the beginning of this service, a key component of Brick’s 250th Anniversary and our Schools recent 75th Anniversary is an effort we have named the “Campaign for Brick.” We might well have named it the “Campaign for Brick’s Future.” Each component – increasing our endowment, new mission outreach endeavors, and some dramatic improvements to our buildings – are about the future. They are aimed at empowering the Brick Church



of the future to be ever more faithful to our Cornerstone, Jesus Christ. Oh, buildings matter, endowments matter, mission programs matter, but not exactly for their own sakes. They matter, they matter immensely, because they rightly serve not themselves, but they serve the One who is our Cornerstone.

Serving that same Cornerstone faithfully is something that changes over time. It's still the same Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and tomorrow, but *how* we worship Him, *how* we serve Him through serving of others, *how* we learn about Him, *how* we find community in Him is forever being re-invented – new and different Christian education curriculum, new and different hymns and anthems, new and different programs, new and different configurations of the building.

It all changes.

It's always changing, but it's always and forever the same Cornerstone.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.