



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Three Cornerstones

### **Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2016**

*Readings:* Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

*Sermon text:* “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:10

The cornerstone for the first Grace Church was laid one hundred and fifty years and two days ago on September 13, 1866. The church was completed and duly consecrated by Bishop Horatio Potter on September 13, 1867. It was located in the hamlet of Hart’s Village, off of what is now Route 44, on the hill by Rodrigo Knolls.

It didn’t last long. A disgruntled man burned it down in 1870. Elliott knows the whole story. He may tell it this Thursday evening when the Millbrook Historical Society holds its meeting here and he gives a talk on the history of Grace Church. Over the following months until September we will have another talk each month, excepting in December. We will hear about the distinguished women of Grace, the stained glass and the needlework guild, the history of race relations in Millbrook and their impact here, stories of rectors and wardens, of music and mischief—and of how’s God’s mission was made incarnate through the people who make up the church.

For the spirit that led to the building of the first Grace Church was not deterred by the loss of the beautiful first church. Another cornerstone was laid in 1870 and another church consecrated the following year. It was built on the corner of Merritt and Church Street, now a parking lot across the DMV. Its cornerstone remains and is part of the third Grace Church; you can find it on the northeast corner within the Memorial Garden. The second church was built in what was then the newly named village of Millbrook. What a difference a few years made, for between 1866 and 1870 a new railroad and station and the division of a farm into streets and building lots by Isaac Merritt had created the village of Millbrook. The railroad served the dairy farmers but also brought new traffic to Millbrook from people in New York City. Millbrook began a period of rapid growth. In the 1880s a number of estate homes were built, among them those of John Wing. He was an influential parishioner—you can see his formidable likeness in the Parish Hall—and donated the land for the present church. The cornerstone was laid in 1901 and the new church consecrated in 1902. You see the cornerstone to the left of the red front door as you entered. If you have ever wondered what the initials AMDG stand for, Elliott Lindsley has the answer (it can be found in his wonderful book *Years of Grace*): *Ad Majoram Dei Gloria*, to the greater glory of God.

Thus we have the three cornerstones of Grace Church. One hundred and fifty years of Grace.

Now a true cornerstone, not just a memorial stone, is that first and orienting right-angle stone laid by the mason atop the foundation. Level horizontal lines and vertical plumb walls will grow from its outside corner. A cornerstone is an orienting point, from which to take our bearings as we build.

What are the three cornerstones of faith, of the church? As good trinitarians, we think immediately of our faith in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the New Testament itself uses the metaphor of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, remembering a verse from the psalms that Jesus sometimes quoted: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22; cf. Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). We read that Peter declared before the Jewish authorities that “Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone’” (Acts 4:11). Paul wrote that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). For Christians, the life, teaching, cross and resurrection of Jesus provide the orienting perspective to interpret scripture, theology, and indeed the meaning and purpose of life and creation.

The cross points to the sky and stretches to the horizon. Take your bearings from that: Love God and your neighbor.

But as we think of cornerstones of the church we can also think of three main components: place, people and mission/vision. We are a village church, located in a particular place serving a certain group of people, called to the mission of God in Christ, to realize God’s vision of a redeemed, just and peaceful world, the promised kingdom of God.

The building provides stability over time, a place to congregate, a site where we can worship, pray and sing, where we can learn and play and offer help to the wider community. But the church as the body of Christ is composed of the people who come through the door, who settle and stay and work and give. Some for only a short time, others for many years. These core people—call them members, and we here are the members of the body today—also welcome those who stop by, who sojourn and are refreshed. The church is not a membership club, however. We don’t give our support as a kind of dues to belong. We give for the mission of the church. We reach out to those in need. We make up an important part of the fabric of the community. And though this church is never the largest church in town, that doesn’t mean it’s contribution is not vital. We are part of the area ecology of faith and community. In many ways, we are leaders, in other ways part of a team. The village, town and region would be poorer without us. God is also calling us to faith in the future, to a role of regional Episcopal leadership and vital community outreach.

Stop for a moment and look at the bricks in each of these rustic style panels defined by the half-timber posts and beams. Each panel is laid in a different panels—a testimony to the craftsmanship of the masons. Pick a panel to look at, and pick out a single brick within the panel. Consider that brick, one of thousands. It was no doubt made from local clay, as the brick-making factories of Beacon, Newburgh and elsewhere on the river were among the largest in the world in their day—when this church was built. That brick is over one hundred years old—yet still it sits firmly secure.

You my friends are part of this church—just as all the thousands who have come before, and, God willing, those who will come in the next one hundred and fifty years.

Maybe the building will change, but the church will continue. Maybe the liturgy will change, but worship will continue. Maybe the community will change, but the need to love and care for each will continue. Maybe you will change as a result of coming here. For you are not here as an observer at a theater or a consumer of religious services. You are here as a soul standing before the God who made you, the Lord who saved you, and the holy Spirit who speaks in your heart and calls you beloved.

Each of these bricks has been touched by human hands many times—when being built of course, but also in the course of time— some more than others. This morning I will invite to pick out one brick and then put your first name on a post-it note and go to that brick. Somewhat like is done at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where prayers are inserted in the cracks between stones (and those are stones that predate Christ). Touch the brick and say a prayer.

In your prayer confess that you have sinned, for we all have. None of us has loved God and neighbor as we could and should. Repent for the history and consequences of human injustice in this harsh and hard world. Our reading from Jeremiah certainly indicates that God cannot be forever patient of injustice and evil. But the gospel—the cornerstone teaching of Christ—also tells us that God is like a shepherd who won't give up on finding that lost sheep; like the woman who combs her house until she finds the lost coin. And then there is joy in heaven. The kingdom is all about joy of life in God.

Pray for yourself and those you love and care for, for their health and happiness and that they also may find a sense of God in their hearts and minds. Give thanks for all of your blessings, including the gift of this legacy of grace, the word of God revealed through Christ, and the hope for life eternal.

For that is my prayer—that the very bricks of this church sing of the love of God, the faith of the people and our hope for the future and for the victory of life and justice.

We are here now. Let us leave our mark for those that follow.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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