

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Anniversary Sunday
Sunday, May 25, 2025**

**“That Foundation Is Jesus Christ”
I Corinthians 3:1-11**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Winchester Cathedral is a beautiful church in southern England. It is renowned for its architecture, its artistic features—and also for its sheer size. The nave, which is the central length of the church, is one of the longest in the world. I did a little measuring, and—ballpark—you could fit this Sanctuary about twelve times, lined up inside Winchester Cathedral. It is an impressive and imposing edifice—and an incredible feat of medieval architecture.

However, in the early twentieth century, something was visibly wrong: huge cracks began appearing in the walls and the ceilings, and it became clear that this beautiful cathedral was on the verge of collapse. Beneath all the art and architecture, Winchester Cathedral...was sinking. It turns out that when they started construction of the church around the year 1100, they had built it in a peat bog: they built it on wetland! They had laid the church atop “a huge raft made from beech trees,” which had “provided a floating foundation” (Heritage).

Now, they’d obviously done a remarkable job, since it lasted about 800 years; but the fact remains that Winchester Cathedral was, essentially, built on a floating dock. And as that timber rotted, the foundation disintegrated, and the church began to sink into the watery bog below.

The only way to save the cathedral was to replace the foundation, but how could they possibly do that? They brought in an accomplished deep-sea diver named William Walker who, for the next five years, worked tirelessly beneath the church—not underground, but underwater. For five years, he donned a “heavy diving suit,” and “spen[t] nearly six hours a day underwater, in [the] darkness, working with his [...] hands,” scooping “out [the] rotten foundation”; and, with thousands of bricks and bags of cement, he singlehandedly built a solid foundation.

In the end, the cathedral was saved from collapse—but it was preserved, it was salvaged, only by reestablishing the footings, by reconstructing the underpinnings, by rebuilding the foundation that had collapsed. The cathedral above was beautiful, but that couldn’t make up for the instability below; it wasn’t until the

rotten beechwood had been scooped out, and a new foundation of concrete laid in, that the church could at last be held up.

And what was true for Winchester Cathedral is also true of Christian ministry: the story of that cathedral reminds us that, when it comes to church, to Christian ministry, everything depends on the foundation. No matter how impressive a building is—if the foundation is soggy, it's sinking; similarly, no matter how impressive a ministry may appear, it all depends on the solidity of its foundation, on what that ministry is built on. So on this Anniversary Sunday, let's ask: what is our foundation?

In our Epistle Lesson, St. Paul is intervening in a church split by divisions and factions. The Corinthian congregation had many gifted, energetic people—but they turned their enthusiasm against each other, which shattered any sense of unity or shared purpose. Their factions are on full display at the beginning of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, when he says: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me [...] that there are quarrels among you [...], that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ'" (1:10-12). And in our Epistle Lesson this morning, Paul picks up this same theme of misguided factions, asking: "For when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not merely human?" (v. 4).

It seems that the Corinthians had mistaken the church for a kind of possessive contest—a competition over who had acquired more followers, which faction has captured more loyalties, which leaders had secured the most influence. But of course, in such a contest, there is no community—there's no sense of the shared purpose and mutuality that's at the heart of church.

The Corinthian congregation was attempting to build the Christian life on the shaky basis of cutthroat competition, on the wobbly foundation of interpersonal rivalries; and, much like Winchester Cathedral sinking in on those soggy beechwood logs, the Corinthians were building their congregation on a foundation that could not hold. So, like William Walker donning his diving suit, pulling out the rotten wood, and building a solid foundation—here St. Paul is working to pull out the rotten footings of factions and competition, and instead to establish a firm foundation for the church.

Paul writes: “For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s *building*” (v. 9). Here Paul introduces the metaphor of the church as a building; to us, that seems like an obvious image—but keep in mind, when Paul was writing, the first dedicated church buildings were still many years away. So the idea of the church as a building, as an edifice—this is a surprising image. And as Paul develops this image, this idea of the church as a building—well, what does a building need? Just ask the good people at Winchester Cathedral: it needs a foundation!

Paul goes on: “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. [...] For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid,” then he adds; “that foundation is Jesus Christ” (vv. 10-11). The Corinthians had been trying to build a church on the shaky foundation of factions and influence—and as the whole Corinthian correspondence lays bare, that simply wasn’t working; divisions and disputes were tearing that congregation apart. They’d attempted to build the church on a soggy foundation, and it was sinking.

So Paul is working to scoop out those soggy underpinnings, and instead to lay for them the foundation that “has [already] been laid”—which is Christ himself. The basis of Christian community is Christ—not us, with all our faults and failings, with all our missteps and misunderstandings; Christ, and Christ only, is the foundation for our shared life together as church. We can build as church only on the basis of Christ’s love and compassion, Christ’s mercy and kindness, Christ’s hope and calling.

And this message, that the foundation of the church is Christ—this brings us both comfort and challenge. The comfort, the assurance, is that the church already has its foundation: Paul says, “no one can lay any foundation other than the one *that has been laid*” (v. 11). The mainline church today is a nervous creature: so anxious to convince the world that we’re still relevant, the church can get all tied up in knots trying to justify our existence or prove our usefulness—but that’s really about trying to come up with some new foundation. Yet instead we may recognize that it’s not up to us to invent a new foundation; the foundation of the church has been laid, and that foundation is Christ.

And the challenge is that, with Christ as our foundation, we are called to build a ministry that conforms to that foundation. That is, since the foundation has already been laid, we need to build out wherever that foundation extends. Our foundation is Christ—Christ in his mercy and kindness and compassion, and in his weakness and suffering, too—and that is our foundation. There’s joy in Christian

ministry, but there's also struggle and uncertainty; and that is all part of building out on the foundation of Christ.

And it's why building on the foundation of Christ requires discernment; Christian ministry can never be haphazard or capricious, because we are called to discern how, as Christ's people in this place, we may build and shape a ministry faithful to our foundation. And that's how the church maintains its purpose—not as a business, not as a secular organization—but as a theological creature, a community founded and building upon Christ. We have this foundation—and, as Paul writes in our Lesson, “Each builder must choose with care how to build on it” (v. 10). And doesn't that give us meaningful work to do?

Today is Anniversary Sunday, which is an important opportunity to reflect on the legacy of faithfulness that we have inherited in this congregation. The foundation of New St. James is Christ: generations before us have built upon this foundation—and have entrusted this ministry to us, leaving us to continue to build this same congregation on this same foundation. Our comfort is that the foundation has been laid in Christ—and likewise our challenge is to continue to build a ministry faithful our foundation. Amen.