

Strong Foundations
Jeff Clinger
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Matthew 7:24-27

'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!'

Outside of the cathedral in a quaint Italian town stands a campanile or bell tower. Construction on this bell tower began in the year 1173 and was built in three phases over the next 174 years. The tower is said to have housed some of Galileo's scientific experiments. Benito Mussolini is said to have ordered structural changes made to the tower. The historic tower was nearly destroyed during the Second World War when it was learned that Nazi's were using it as an observation post. Still, through it all, it stands today and is known famously throughout the world as the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

This tower is eight stories high and leans at an angle of 5.5 degrees. This means that it is 4.5 meters off of where it used to stand vertically. The tower does not lean because of Galileo's science experiments, it does not lean because of Mussolini's attempts to modify it, and it does not lean because of any ill effects from World War II. In fact, the lean in the tower is not something that has even happened gradually or over time. The tower began to lean to the southeast shortly after construction began in 1173 for one very simple reason. The foundation for the structure was poorly laid on a loose substrate that has allowed the structure to shift.

As a young child I loved building things and I remember some of the tough lessons that I had to learn about the need for a good foundation. I remember constructing

cabins out of Lincoln Logs and learning early on that it was much better to build on a nice level section of tile floor or the coffee table, than the soft and often uneven surface of carpeting. A soft and moveable foundation didn't allow for solid construction. However, a nice solid foundation allowed quality construction to take place. Many of us get this simple concept when it comes to things like Lincoln Logs or home repair projects. For some reason though it seems tougher for many of us to grasp when it comes to taking care of ourselves and the things we need in life.

This morning as the children continue to learn about the parables of Jesus in their Sunday school class they're looking at the parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders. This story comes from Matthew 7:24-27.

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This brief passage opens with the following words attributed to Jesus, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them..." And as we begin this morning, we have to first ask ourselves what Jesus means by "these words of mine?" Does he mean the Bible? No, when Jesus was teaching he had no concept that his words would be bound together with the Hebrew Scriptures and other writings from his community of followers after he died. Does he mean the Hebrew Scriptures that would have been important to his community of followers? No, because even though these stories were

important to the faith of 1st century Jews, the stories from the Hebrew Scriptures are not what Jesus was talking about.

In Matthew 7:24 Jesus says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them...” What words is he talking about? Let’s back up for just a minute. You all know that as Jesus spoke and as the Bible was originally put together it did not include chapter and number divisions, right? Our system of dividing the Bible into chapters and numbers came long after the time of Jesus. So even though we might pull out a small section of text to use on a Sunday morning it is always connected to and related to the text that appears before and after it in the Bible. So, when Jesus says “Everyone then who hears these words of mine...” he’s referencing the words that he has spoken, in this case, the words that he has just spoken as a part of one complete teaching.

The seventh chapter of Matthew is the conclusion to a large section of Jesus’ teaching often called the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon on the mount, which is likely familiar to many of you because of it’s “Blessed are...” statements, begins in the 5th chapter of Matthew and runs through the sixth and seventh. Jesus is teaching his followers about how to live in relationship with one another and in relationship with God. Our scripture passage for today is the conclusion of that teaching and, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them shall be like the wise man...” is a statement Jesus makes as he concludes his teaching we call the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount, especially the concluding illustration of the wise and foolish builder, is a call to us as individuals and as a faith community to make sure that we’re building our lives on a strong foundation. So, let’s spend some time talking about what that strong foundation might look like for our lives today. If any of you are

television watchers what kinds of messages do we receive about the foundations we need for our lives? We are told repeatedly that we need certain things; a nice car, a big house, the right clothes, the right electronic toys, the right beauty products, the right physical appearance, and financial security for retirement. And the folks who send us these messages are good at what they do aren't they!? Depending on what kind of program we might be watching we'll get different messages targeted at the certain group of people they think might be watching. We are sent messages over and over again that the foundation we need to be happy and healthy and whole is a foundation built on having the right things and the right image so that we can have the right friends and the right security.

However, the Gospel, or good news, of Jesus radically contradicts this mindset. The scriptures tell us over and over again that meaning and purpose do not come through the acquisition of things, but rather that they come from having faith. Faith is the best foundation upon which we can build our lives.

I say this with confidence, that faith is the best foundation upon which we can build our lives. However, I want to be clear about what is meant by faith in this context. All too often the idea of faith is boiled down to an intellectual approval – to have faith, for many, means simply to believe that something is true. For many, having faith is equated with “believing in” God or Jesus. This language is eerily similar to what is used when we talk about small children “believing in” the tooth fairy or Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Faith is not simply about stating our belief in something, in God in our case. Faith is much more complex than this. It is relational – it is about commitment to a way of living in relationship with God and others.

Marcus Borg, one of my favorite authors and theologians talks a fair amount about faith as something more complex than “believing” in his book “The Heart of Christianity.” One illustration or comparison that Borg uses that I find especially helpful is that faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Things that are buoyant float. Borg explains that if we can relax and trust in God to lift us up and care for us that is a powerful way in which we can have faith.

Virgil Brady was the senior pastor of my home church, Lawrence First United Methodist, for 16 years. In his new book, “Believe the Believable” Virgil explains faith in the following way:

Faith is a decision to respond to the invitation to be part of God's activity in building a better world. Faith is responding to the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.... The grace of God... is good news (gospel) for those of us who, more frequently than we would like, make mistakes, fail, miss the mark and live out-of-bounds. It is by the power of this grace that we step into the future with hope and power. The decision to respond with gratitude to this gift of grace is what it means to have faith.

Faith is not simply about believing with our minds. Faith is about trusting with our whole being that God will lift us up and keep us afloat through the storms of life. Faith is about making a decision to be connected to God's activity in the world and to be connected to God's love and grace for each and every one of us.

Now, just as our lives need a strong foundation in faith, our faith needs a strong foundation as well. Far too many people, especially when believing that faith is simply about making an “I believe” statement, have built their faith upon shifting sand. When the storms of life rage and the winds of pain and despair blow these people often find

themselves struggling to maintain their faith. In order to be a strong foundation for our lives, our faith needs a strong foundation as well.

Many of the reasons that people give for understanding faith and life are not based upon a strong foundation. Three of the most common reasons that religious people might give for believing certain things about God or understanding faith in a certain way are “because my Sunday School teacher said so,” “because my parents said so,” and “because we’ve always done it that way.” These are not strong foundations for a faith that is vibrant, meaningful, and world changing.

So, what is the solid rock upon which we should build our faith? There are three key things I want to spend a minute or two on this morning. Following the teaching of Jesus, there is much in the Sermon on the Mount that gives us the tools we need to understand and live lives of faith. The Sermon on the Mount tells us that we are blessed not for having the right things or believing the right things, but rather...

The fifth through seventh chapters of Matthew are rich in content. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus begins by teaching that persons who seem to be looked down upon or pitied in the world are actually blessed. God is with us when we are down, when we mourn, when we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We also learn that as people of faith we are called to be salt and light for the world. Jesus teaches that as people of faith we are to do no harm to others, that we are not to retaliate, in fact that we are even to love our enemies. Jesus teaches his disciples to give from the heart, to pray sincerely to God, to fast without want of reward, to remember that no one can serve two masters, not to worry about what the future holds, and not to judge others.

Second, as United Methodists we have a four-fold method for shaping our faith. I've talked about this before, but for the sake of review I want to share it again. This tool, or this set of lenses if you will, is called the quadrilateral. The historical idea is this; four different things – scripture, tradition, experience, and reason – inform and shape our faith. As we learn and grow in our relationship with God and with one another we learn about the work of God in the world through the stories of scripture. We learn about God's work through the tradition of the church. We also learn about God through the ways in which we experience God – through the laughter of children and the beauty of nature. And finally, we learn about God and come to understand God's work in the world through the gift of reason that God has given to us.

As we grow in faith using the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as well as those four tools of our United Methodist method, we are to immerse ourselves in the Christian life by learning and living as fully as we can in accordance with God's hopes for us. A couple of weeks ago now two of our youth participated in a program that emphasized the five different disciplines of Christian life; study, community, service, worship, and prayer. Each of these five areas gives us opportunities to learn about God, to connect with God, and to serve God. The more we can do each of these things more solid the foundation for our faith will be.

As human beings we are much like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. If our foundation isn't laid correctly we might be able to remain standing, maybe even for years. But we will never be what our designer intended us to be. If we don't lay a solid foundation for our lives and if we don't build our faith upon a solid foundation we will never fully be the people God hopes we can be. We will be off balance and we will seem dangerously close

to collapsing and crashing down upon ourselves. So be one who hears the words of Jesus and act on them. The more we can follow the teaching of Jesus, the more we can use the tools of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to build our faith, and the more we can participate and live the Christian disciplines of study, community, service, prayer and worship, the more we'll be able to stand strong and firm in the midst of the storms of life.