

Pastor's Message – 3/21/21
Sermon on the Mount: Build on a Rock
Matthew 7:24-27

Jesus often used parables to make a point: practical stories that his audience could relate to. In our Bible reading today, Jesus gives us a parable that we can relate to: 2,000 years after it was first told. Jesus gives us a story of two builders, not two dreamers who talk about someday building their dream home. No, Jesus gives us two builders, not two philosophers, who go on and on about the value of a place we can call home. Jesus gives us builders, not architects who can draw a nice home on paper. It's important we recognize this. In giving us builders, Jesus is talking about doing, about acting. Both people in Jesus' parallel stories here build houses. They make something, in this case, houses. Jesus is not talking about theology or creeds or doctrine here, but practice.

Not more than a few weeks ago, the news was filled with the stories of the severe winter storm that befell the southern U.S, affecting especially the electrical infrastructure of Texas. We know about winter storms. We know about snowstorms and ice storms in Wisconsin. We know about tornadoes and hurricanes, so we can understand the effects of weather on buildings. The two builders in Jesus' story have that in common also—besides being practical people of action—their homes are both tested by the forces of nature. The quality of both buildings will be measured by their ability to withstand the assaults of storms, high winds and water. These two builders are building in a real world where a storm can take a house down in a matter of seconds.

So, what is the difference between the builders? The first is “wise,” and the second is “foolish,” Jesus says. That's how Jesus contrasts the two

builders. And what makes the first builder wise? He builds his house on rock, while the foolish builder builds his house on sand. That's the difference—rock and sand. Rock is hard and solid; sand is soft and shifting. Foolish builders expect their house to stand on shifting sand. The wisdom of both builders is measured by their building's durability in a storm. One lasts, the other fails.

We need to be careful how we interpret Jesus' story of the two builders. Perhaps surprisingly, this is not a story comparing those who follow Jesus and those who do not. Believers cannot feel smug in the certainty of their faith as if nothing bad will ever happen to Christians. As Jesus spells out the meaning of his story, he makes it clear that both builders represent people who "hear these words of mine." It's not a matter of one hearing Jesus teach and the other missing it. Both listen to Jesus teach. Today we might say that both builders, the wise and the foolish, represent people who have read their Bibles. Both listen to sermons, and both may participate in Bible study. They know what Jesus has taught. Even more, they may understand his teaching.

So, what's the difference between these two listeners to Jesus' teaching? The wise one listens to Jesus teach, understands his teaching, and puts it into practice. As Jesus puts it, this one "hears these words of mine and does them." The foolish one, in contrast, hears Jesus teach, grasps his teaching, but never does what Jesus says. In other words, this listener to Jesus's teaching "hears these words of mine and does not do them."

So, the story of the two builders is really a story about what Jesus expects from those who listen to him teach and preach. Showing up for worship; just being a member in a Church isn't enough. He wants more

than showing up to hear him. He wants more than praise for his valuable insights. He wants more than an impressive theological library or a list of truths and values to which we subscribe. He wants a life based on his teachings. He wants us to do what he has told us to do. He wants us to do his will even when it's difficult, even when storms rage.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not so much an ideology or a philosophy as it is a blueprint for how to build a Christ-like life. His practical teachings show us how to navigate our relationships in Christ-like ways. The sermon is meant to show itself in how we live day-in and day-out, when life is easy and when life is hard. It's not just about what we believe but how we live.

You probably know enough about modern psychology and the steps of growth from Eric Erickson or Abraham Maslow or Carl Jung. Those theories are really nothing new. In the ancient Greek world, they believed in and wrote about an ascending staircase of maturity. It went from knowledge to understanding to wisdom. Knowledge was learning certain truths. Understanding was grasping those truths so that you could actually speak intelligently about them. Wisdom, though, was putting those truths into practice, doing them. Jesus is saying here that wisdom is putting his teachings into practice.

So, imagine you get really sick, I mean, sick to where your life is at stake. Your physician prescribes a treatment that includes a protocol of specific meds, surgery and diet. You respect your doctor. She is a respected authority on treating your illness. You may ask for a second opinion, but wisdom for healing and continued life would dictate that you follow her prescription. You'll take those pills, have that surgery and follow that diet,

just as she says. It would be foolish to ignore her and likely just as foolish to follow your own opinion.

It's like that with Jesus' teachings. They are meant to be done. He wants to see us praying and forgiving, loving our enemies and helping the poor. He wants us to make peace and show mercy. He expects us to salt the earth and brighten dark places. The early followers of Jesus understood this wisdom approach to Jesus' teaching. James writes in his letter that "we must be doers of the word and not hearers only" (James 1:22-25).

As we move through the season of Lent, and plan on resuming public worship on Easter Sunday, we also know that we still have to get through Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. We listen to the words of Jesus in the shadow of his cross. That cross of love and sacrifice has become for us a motivation to build our lives on what Jesus has taught. We practice what he teaches not out of fear of judgment or strict obedience, but out of love and gratitude. As we watch him weather the storm of his Passion, we see him practicing what he taught—humility, reconciliation, forgiveness, prayer. He withstood his storm with amazing grace and strength, and he did that for us.

His love inspires us and lifts us the expectation to be not just good listeners to his words, but dynamic listeners who build on rock, putting his words to work and trusting that the gates of hell will not prevail against us (Mt. 16:18). As we are loved, so we offer love in return to those around us and beyond, throughout the whole world. Affirming and acknowledging as we are gifted, so we offer gifts in return. As we receive light and love, we reflect the same. The rock that we build on is the word of forgiveness and salvation that comes to us from God through Jesus our Christ. Amen.