

## “We Would Be Building”

Mathew 7: 21-29

Third Sunday after Pentecost/A, June 1, 2008

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Today’s gospel lesson is particularly timely in many ways. We have witnessed one explosive event after another in recent weeks. From the cyclone in Myanmar, the earthquake in China to the many tornadoes that have ravaged communities in the Midwest, the world seems to be coming apart at the seams. In the face of such tragedies, we feel helpless. There is no way anyone can prevent such destruction. Could people have built homes that were cyclone proof or earthquake proof or tornado proof? Perhaps, however in most cases the forces of nature would still have been stronger than anything we construct. When a funnel cloud touches down it sucks up everything in its path and there is nothing you can do to prevent this from happening.

What we hear in this passage from Matthew’s gospel is unsettling. There are two parts to this reading. He begins by warning his listeners “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” In other words, he warns us it is not enough to talk the talk, you will have to walk the talk as well. If you consider yourself a Christian and there is no visible evidence of this then what does it really mean? If you say you belong to such and such a church, however, when it comes time to support its ministry or teach Church School or serve a meal at South Park Inn and you are too busy, what does your discipleship really mean?

It is not enough to do good works. Jesus wants us to do more. He needs for us to discern the will of God. Are we doing what God is calling us to do or what we are comfortable doing? The answers to these questions are not always easy. When Jesus is no longer with his disciples they will have to discern the will of God for themselves. We will all be held accountable not for our flashy works of faith like casting out demons (as if any of us could even do this), but for simpler deeds of faith like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Tony Robinson comments that, “in Fred Craddock’s wonderful little book, *The Gospels*, he sees this passage from Matthew’s gospel as the key to Matthew for whom it all comes down to this, ‘did you love, really love, your neighbor?’ and ‘How did you treat other people?’ That is to say, having Christ’s name on our lips (“Lord, Lord”) and dazzling, showy signs: prophesy, casting out demons, and deeds of power that tend to point to us don’t impress me much. Did you feed the hungry? Give clothes to the naked? Visit those in prison?” God is not impressed by our razzle-dazzle. Rather, simple acts of compassion are the building blocks for a firm foundation of faith.

In verse 24 Jesus sounds a lot like Moses. He tells the people to do what he teaches and live; don’t and be carried away. Like Moses, he implores us to choose life. He teaches us how to choose life with a parable about two builders. The foolish man built his house on sand. When the rains came his house was washed away. The wise man built his house upon a rock. When the rains came, the house with a firm foundation was able to weather the storm. A strong faith is what gives our house a firm foundation. If we not only know the teachings of Jesus, but we live them in day by day, then we have built our spiritual

homes on a firm foundation. When the storms come and the troubles seem to overwhelm us, those who have a firm faith foundation will not be washed away.

The first hurricane I remember vividly was Hurricane Andrew. I was in seminary and living in Washington, D.C. I had just been to Florida for a brief vacation when the hurricane was forecasted. I remember seeing pictures on the television of places we recognized, laying in ruins. There was a story about one homeowner's experience in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. This distraught homeowner pointed a finger, not at Hurricane Andrew, but at inferior materials and cheap, careless, shoddy construction. He had bought what he thought was a beautiful, well built home and learned in fact, this was not the case. He complained, "you can see it now, sheets of plywood with nails that missed the trusses, complete sections of roof trusses lying on the ground. They should never come loose if they are attached properly, but they weren't and we didn't know it, because it didn't show...until the storm came."<sup>1</sup>

It is not always easy to tell which house will withstand the storms of life. Building ones life upon a firm foundation is not an incidental thing. We don't want to take our chances waiting for the storm to hit. Storms come into our lives unexpectedly. Therefore we must be intentional about the commitment we make to our spiritual lives. Jesus warns us not to be taken in or impressed by a showy exterior. It is the same when we purchase a home. Are you impressed by the granite countertops and the jacuzzi tub or do you go straight to the basement to inspect the foundation and the mechanical system? If the foundation is falling apart, the heating system about to go and the roof springing leaks, the fancy stuff makes little difference. Building a home on a firm foundation and then lovingly maintaining it is a challenge. What Jesus calls us to do and become is not easy. It takes hard work. It takes a significant commitment. Just as a house or a church or a school needs attention if it is to stand the tests of time, so too a faith that can withstand the trials and tribulations of life is not something we can take fore-granted.

I said this parable was timely for many reasons. Jesus' story has much to say about the journey we are about to embark on together in the life of this church. We have prayerfully discerned where we believe God is calling us to be in the future. We believe that in order to faithfully minister to our community for generations to come, we need to reconstruct our physical building. In order to live into the faith statement that adorns our bulletin each week, "an open and affirming church for all God's people" we must make significant changes to the structure we call South Congregational Church. We believe God is calling us to tear down most of this building and construct a new one. There may be some of us that think such a proposition is crazy, that God is not calling us to any such a thing. We are taking a significant leap of faith to even suggest this. Only God knows for sure if this is in fact God's will. We can only trust that it is God's voice we hear and not our egos or selfish desires or folly. If we are to entertain the possibility of building something new we must trust that God is in the midst of this from start to finish.

That is what I firmly believe. Our egos have not brought us to this decision. The building committee is not doing this to justify its existence. Neither Dick nor I have an

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Reaves, "Building a Life", sermon on Matthew 7: 21-29, January 3, 1993.

edifice complex. It is the will of God that we embark on this journey and see it to its completion. Making this vision real will take amazing sacrifices on the part of many people. We do this because we have heard people testify to how this church has changed their lives, helped them make it through those most challenging situations, loving them when they have made the most outrageous and painful choices. We do this because we love God and God is calling us to do this.

If it is the will of God and if we have built our house on a firm foundation, it will stand firm, for many, many generations. It is a joy to be part of something that is so much greater than oneself. It is astonishing to have the opportunity to leave behind a permanent and tangible testimony to ones faith. It is a privilege to express ones gratitude in such an awesome way. When I think of astonishing building projects, I think of the Washington Cathedral. The structure took decades to build. In fact, they were still building portions of it when I was at seminary in the 1990's. The people who agreed to build this magnificent structure were no longer alive to see it completed. However, they had faith that it was what God had called them to do. People from all walks of life have worshipped there and have been touched by its beauty and grandeur. It cost millions of dollars to erect yet many would attest it was more than worth the effort. I pray that we will have the privilege to say the same thing about South Church.

We are not blessed because we have the means to build a new facility. We will not be blessed because we have the nicest, newest church in town. People will not come to know Christ or grow as disciples because of what we build. We have all come here because we have been touched by the Holy Spirit and have witnessed the power of God's love in and through the work of this church. Building a new church will take a commitment of time and money. It will test our resources in ways we have yet to imagine. It will test our faith in ways that will ultimately be life giving for everyone. This is just one act of discipleship. Being a disciple requires a far greater commitment. When we say yes to Jesus, we offer him our life. We do what our brother Moses did, we choose life, and then we pray each day that God will guide us, equip us and empower us to do whatever is life giving and life affirming.

So church, I ask you this morning, are you ready? Do you know what it takes to build a firm foundation? Are you willing to find out? That is all God asks. Give yourself over to the task, not only the task of building a new church, but building the kind of faith that will serve you well all the days of your life. The church is nothing more than a building if its members have not been transformed, if we are not living the life God intends us to live. Take a deep breath, put on your hardhats, pray like the dickens and trust that God is in our midst, therefore, we have nothing to fear! Amen