

“Building codes”
Psalm 46
Matthew 7:24-27
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Introduction

Have you ever looked in a mud puddle after the sediment cleared, on a clear day, and seen the entire sky reflected in it? Parables are like that. They reflect the kingdom of God in a nutshell. Jesus taught his followers 2000 years ago, and us today, in parables. Stories with a deeper meaning. Today’s parable is about foundations. There is a famous tower whose foundation remind me of today’s parable. In 1174, the Italian architect Bonnano Pisano began work on what to us is a famous bell tower for a Cathedral. The tower was to be a cylindrical, eight-story, 185-foot-tall building with arcaded stories, a fine example of Tuscan Romanesque architecture. There was just one problem. During construction, the builders discovered that the soil around the Cathedral was much softer than they anticipated. The foundation Pisano designed for the building was too shallow to support the structure. Before long, the whole building had begun to tilt, and continued to tilt, until finally the architect and the builders realized that nothing could be done to make the Leaning Tower of in the city of Pisa straight again. The Tower of Pisa has continued to stand for over 800 years, but it now leans more than 18 feet away from center. Even with all our modern technology, this building can never be made perfectly straight. Architectural specialists predict that eventually the structure will fall down.

Movement 1

Jesus tells his followers a closing parable at the end of his Sermon on the Mount 2000 years ago. A man builds his house on sand. Rain falls. Floods come. Winds blow and beat. The house falls, and great is its fall. His words are recorded in short bursts, in staccato fashion. You can almost hear the rain pummeling the house in his words.

When Jesus speaks about houses and foundations he knows what he is talking about. Jesus is a builder. He understands the importance of foundations. That is why he paints a vivid picture contrasting sand and rock as foundation materials. He knows some materials make better foundations than others.

The people listening to Jesus 2000 years ago also understand the significance of building upon rock versus sand. But very few people in ancient Palestine want to live in the rocks. It means climbing the side of a slope and hauling up materials. Living in the hills maks for more difficult travel. Water has to be toted and winter winds are colder. Most people follow the path of least resistance and build along the riverbeds. The scenery is more pleasant, the water is more convenient, and the house is sheltered from the cold winds of winter. And though flooding is a

danger, most of the year the streams trickle pleasantly down the hillsides into the river nearby.

But on rare occasions, perhaps only once a generation, the flood would come. There would be a combination of an unusually heavy snow, a quick spring thaw, a torrential downpour. The result was a vicious flashflood which sweeps away everything in its path. Entire hamlets wash away. House after house gone and great is the fall.

Move forward 1700 years. French engineers are asked where to put a new city on the Mississippi river. They survey and study the geography for years, and come to the conclusion that a new city should be placed inland on the Mississippi, on high ground, to avoid flooding and maybe even avoid hurricanes. They tell city planners that the current site of New Orleans is a bad place to put a city. But the city planners ignore them. They have already made up their minds. They put in levees for areas reclaimed by the sea. And they build the city of New Orleans on low ground. No one listened to those French engineers. No one trusted them.

Move forward to the present day. Ours is an age of biblical illiteracy and absence of trust. We live in a culture in which we are told to trust in no one but ourselves. And especially do not trust in God. We might be reluctant to do anything about our biblical illiteracy because we doubt the relevance of such a lengthy document written between 3000 and 2000 years ago. So there are some who, in their biblical illiteracy, think Jesus is okay with us judging other people as not worthy of our friendship. Think Jesus is okay with violence on a small scale or a large scale, to prove who is right with God. Think Jesus is okay with a survival of the fittest mindset, a mindset that refuses to help the poor. Think Jesus is okay with *quid pro quo*, "what is in it for me" relationships. I believe Biblical illiteracy, and the absence of trust in God which this illiteracy implies, that this ideology is the house built on sand. The house of which Jesus speaks. A house that will not withstand the storms of tragedy that life always brings. Storms of tragedy such as when it is apparent we are no longer in the driver's seat, and in fact, never really were. When we ourselves are judged. When we ourselves are persecuted. When we ourselves are poor. When we or our children feel alone and unloved because we do not understand that love is not something we receive as much as it is something we freely give. That love does not abide. Instead, it multiplies.

Let us look at a house built on a firmer foundation.

Movement 2

Jesus finishes telling his parable. Another man builds HIS house on rock. Just as before, rain falls. Floods come. Winds blow and beat. And THIS man's house does not fall. The house on rock suffers the same beating as the house on sand, yet it survives.

When the Empire State building was being planned, there were cynics who said that you can't build a building out of concrete and steel 102 stories high. It is impossible. The

whole thing will come crashing down! However, engineers said that there is virtually no limit to how high you can build, providing the foundation is deep enough and strong enough. Different story than the leaning tower of Pisa.

Jesus does not say those who hear and do his words, who build their house of faith on firm foundation, will be spared adversity. He says they will endure, not be spared adversity, but on the right foundation, will endure.

What kind of foundation is Jesus speaking of? The Good News we read in the Gospels is God's love for us.

There was an article in the Los Angeles Times about a man and his four year old daughter, Melinda. Every time her father came around, Melinda wanted him to read "Three little pigs" to her. Her father grew a little tired of it.

So the father got a tape recorder, recorded the story, and taught Melinda how to turn it on. He thought that had solved his problem. But this lasted less than a day. Soon Melinda came to her father, holding out "The Three Little Pigs" and asking him to read. Impatiently, the father said, "Melinda, you have the tape recorder, and you know how to turn it on!" The little girl looked up at her father with her big eyes and said, "Yes, daddy, but I can't sit on its lap!"

Of course, what she really wanted was love. That is what we all want, and we never outgrow our need for it. To be valued, to be cared about, to be loved with a love without strings, a love that will always be there for us.

The Sermon on the Mount, for which this parable acts as the closer, tells us what the love of God and the love of God's people for each other looks like.

Movement 3

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew destroyed thousands of homes in South Florida. Yet in an area where the wreckage looked like a war zone, one house remained standing, still firmly anchored to its foundation.

When a reporter asks the homeowner why his house was not blown away, he replies, "I built this house myself. I built it according to the Florida state building code. I was told that a house built according to code could withstand a hurricane-- and it did."

Chapters 5-7 of Matthew record the Sermon on the Mount. It has been called the Christian Magna Charta, the Christian Manifesto. It contains the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the Golden Rule. It deals with murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and worry. It gives instructions on prayer, giving to the poor, fasting, judging others, and saving money. The Sermon on the Mount has been called the building code for the Christian faith.

Just listen to this list of phrases from the Sermon on the Mount that have echoed through the ages:

Blessed are the poor in Spirit

You Are the Salt of the earth

You are the light of the world

Let your “Yes” be “Yes” and your “No” be “No”

If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also

Love your enemies

When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Where your treasure is there your heart will be also

You cannot serve God and mammon

Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself

Do not judge, or you too will be judged

Do not throw your pearls before swines

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find...

Do to others what you would have them do to you

Enter the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction

Wolves in sheep’s clothing

By their fruit you will recognize them

In our community that we call the church we have a common language, a uniform building code and this is it (hold up a Bible). And I would suggest that if you are going to build a faith home that you start in the fifth chapter of the book of Matthew and read to the end of the 7th. If you are going to build a faith home, Jesus said, you must build upon

something solid. There are no words more solid on which to base your life than these words from the Sermon on the Mount.

Conclusion

We all have a choice. To have confidence in ourselves, or to have confidence in God's Word, maybe a Word that seems risky to you. I believe in today's lesson, Jesus tells us confidence in ourselves is confidence in a house built on sinking sand. And when darkness, stormy gale, and overwhelming flood; Deep waters, fiery trials, and rivers of sorrow come, our confidence in ourselves, that is, our houses built on sand, all sink into that sand.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a poem in 1817 for a sonnet writing contest. The title is Ozymandias.

I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said--"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert....Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Such is the fate of those who build their house on the sand of self confidence. You have another choice besides confidence in yourself. You can choose to be confident in God's Word. The firm foundation of a house built not on the sand of self-confidence,

but the rock of confidence in God's excellent Word. A bulwark never failing. An anchor in the stormy gale. On Christ the solid rock we stand. All other ground is sinking sand. Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...