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First Christian Church  
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## Questions Jesus Asked - "Why Do You Call Me Lord, Lord?"

Luke 6:46-49 NRSV 46 "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? 47I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

Romans 8:22-28 NRSV We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

To my surprise, I've only once been called for jury duty. It was in California, in the first year after Barbara and I had moved there. I expected to be quickly challenged and dismissed by the defendant's attorneys because, of course, the common wisdom among jury consultants is that ministers are wild cards on juries. But I wasn't. And I ended up seated on that jury. And while I have always said, and continue to say, that I am happy to serve on a jury, that I think it's part of what I owe my fellow citizens, this trial severely, uh, tried that commitment. Because the trial ending up lasting 11 weeks. The challenges of juggling family responsibilities as well as those of a new job for the better part of three months are not something I want to do again. The case was actually interesting, though, although on occasion tedious. It was a construction defect lawsuit in which a group of homeowners in Napa County alleged that their builder was intentionally negligent in the way he had installed their foundations – so very negligent, in fact, that their attorneys introduced pictures into evidence that showed the floors in

the homes moving up and down over the course of a year by as much as twelve inches! That's a lot of movement. I learned much, much more about foundation technology than I had ever expected to know, but I also was reminded very graphically of how building anything - a house, a life, a relationship – needs to start with a sure foundation.

That's the topic of Jesus' parable today from the gospel of Luke, the second in our Lenten series on "Questions Jesus Asked." So let us ask this morning, what might Jesus have in mind in this parable about the rock and the sand, what does it mean to root your life, your faith, on a solid foundation – and what **doesn't** it mean! In that regard, I first want to talk about what I think can be a terrible misunderstanding of this parable, but in order to do so, we need to know a little bit about the time and place within which Luke was writing his story of Jesus' life and teachings. Scholars tell us that Luke was likely from the city of Antioch, in what is now Turkey. By the time of Luke's writing of the gospel, Antioch was third largest city in the Roman Empire. But one of the reasons that it grew so much during the first century is that the Roman engineers had determined that the old city was built on mud-flats and houses were built out of wood – but Antioch, it turns out, lies on what we now call a fault line and frequently experienced mild earthquakes that would shake those mud flats and those wooden houses to the ground. And so the Roman engineers began building houses and public buildings away from those mud flats – which, during an earthquake, turned to Jello – and instead on ground that was solid, and they also began using stones to build houses. And that combination of using stones and of building on solid rock meant that for the first time the residents of Antioch didn't have to worry about their houses falling down during minor earthquakes and storms. So while to us this metaphor of building on the solid rock may not seem particularly novel, to the residents of Antioch reading Luke's gospel this metaphor was indeed fresh and apt because the now "thriving city was full of strong, durable new imperial buildings and blocks of houses constructed on rocky

ground, made of stone.”<sup>1</sup>

So what does that bit of history teach us? Well, it means that Luke’s hearers, particularly in there in Antioch, would have indeed known what it was to feel that scary shifting of the earth underneath them – both literally (with the experience of the earthquakes in Antioch) and metaphorically (with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and everything that they had thought was secure). But they also would know what safety there could be in the stone and rock alternative. And so Luke, through Jesus’ parable, is trying to remind his readers that building their lives on a sure and solid foundation, a foundation of rock as the parable puts it, instead of ground that shifts and sways is what one needs to do in order to best experience and know the abiding grace of God.

But here is where that misunderstanding I spoke of earlier can get its start. For you see, I have heard too many people interpret this parable as saying something, well, *cruel* about God. I have heard too many people say to someone whose life has collapsed, whose emotional house is in shambles, who are sodden and drenched from the storms of life, that God did this to them because they didn’t have enough faith. You’ve heard these things too: When someone has experienced a terrible loss I have heard people say “well, if only you’d had more faith.” If only you’d chosen to build your life on the “right” ground, this wouldn’t have happened to you. I have heard people say that God sent you this storm to pummel your life and rip down your house because you chose to build on sand, because you didn’t have enough faith, or the right kind of faith, or didn’t have the “right” views on this issue or that issue, this doctrine or that doctrine.

I know that you have heard those voices, because they are in the culture all around us. They are in the shrill voices of too many who almost seem to take delight in the misery that some people experience, and are even quick to say that God also is

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<sup>1</sup>Angela V. Askew, [http://www.dfms.org/6087\\_61515\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.dfms.org/6087_61515_ENG_HTML.htm)

pleased that these folks' lives are in shambles. But my friends, I believe that that is simply wrong, misguided, tragically in error. And I think that such statements in fact grieve God Himself – who must wonder why His children sometimes so badly misunderstand Him! Because look at the parable again: It is not a **threat**, it is simply a **description**. Jesus is not threatening you or me, He's simply telling the truth about what life is like. For after all, rains WILL fall in your life and mine. Storms WILL come. The houses of our lives WILL sometimes shake. And sometimes that shaking could have been predicted; there is, of course, a certain truth here that is inescapable: actions do generally have consequences. The decisions that you or I make generally have certain things that follow in their wake. If you treat people meanly, it is more likely than not that that is how you'll find yourself treated. If you spend your money on things that don't truly satisfy, you won't have money to spend on the things that are truly important.

But here is the point: the fact that actions often have predictable consequences is not the same thing as saying that God wills anyone evil, or certainly it is not the same as saying that God delights in any of his creatures' sufferings. *Do you hear the difference?* Sometimes storms will come and due to decisions you have made and the consequences from how your house has been built will indeed mean that it will shudder and shake and even fall down sometimes. But does that mean that God has willed bad things for you or me? No. How does Paul put it there in Romans? *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God."* But please notice: That **doesn't** mean that God doesn't seek to do good things even for bad people. It **doesn't** mean that God only works for good for those who love God. And it certainly **doesn't** mean that if things are not "working together" in your life or mine that that is because God has decided to withhold good things.

What it **does** mean, I believe, is this: God is never absent. God is working in the

midst of **everything** that occurs to try to bring what good is possible out of it. To love God is precisely to realize that God is always at work in **everything** seeking to bring good, even when the storms come, even when the house shakes, even when it all falls apart. God will be there, not gloating but with grace. God will be there helping to pick up the pieces. God will indeed always urge and hope that you and I will build and rebuild our houses, our earthly lives on even more solid foundations – and God will continue to offer us the possibilities for that. But that is not to say that God caused our houses to fall. And it is certainly not to say that God is somehow pleased by that.

So, again, do you hear that difference? It is important, it is crucial, it is key: to say that sometimes our houses weren't build on a solid foundation is **not** to say that God is the one who somehow seeks to destroy those houses. In fact, let me once again offer you a rule of thumb, a very simple test that you can use to assess things that you hear said about God. It's very simple really. **When you hear someone say something about God, ask yourself if someone said the exact same thing about a human parent would we call that parent "good"?** I have found that that little test cuts through so much bad theology and can remind us so much of *why* God is **worshipful** – and not simply a bully to be placated. For example, when you hear someone say that "God is testing a person by sending him evil to see if that person will still love Him" ask yourself: If a father caused harm to his children in order to "test" those children to see if they'd still love him, we wouldn't call that "good" we'd call it monstrous. Put another way, the gospel of God's unconditional love known through Jesus Christ tells us that we shouldn't say anything about God that we wouldn't say about a loving parent. Is God's love more perfect than the love of human parents? Of course – thankfully! But the principle is the same. A parent loves his or her children and a truly loving parent will never intentionally do evil to them. It is the same with God – except perfectly so.

In that trial where I served on the jury, we ended up determining that the builder had indeed purposefully build the foundations of those houses in a shoddy and negligent manner causing them to shift up and down and up and down over the course of the seasons. Where he was supposed to have put in fifty-six inch piers for the foundation, he put in twenty-four inch ones. It's no wonder indeed the houses were shifting on the sloppy soil! And what was the fix? Well, we on the jury decided that there was no quick fix. Instead, each of those houses had to be, as it were, rebuilt from the bottom up. That meant that each pier had to be taken out and re-sunk one pier at a time. That meant that each floor joist had to be removed one at a time and replaced with something more adequate, more sturdy.

That's a pretty good metaphor for how God works in your life and mine. There is not one of us here who couldn't stand to have our foundations shored up at points. And that's what God offers us. Sometimes one pier at a time, one post at a time, one joist at a time. God offers us an ever more secure foundation in each and every moment. God offers us depth when shallowness proves to be not enough. God offers strength when some of our timbers are weak. Does it mean that the houses of our lives may not yet shift sometimes? No. Life will continue to have its storms and its quakes. But God doesn't send those to test or hurt us. God loves us – and everything that God has made. God delights when our foundations prove strong and continues to seek to shore us up when they prove weak. God indeed, indeed works for the good in all things. If it were not so, God would not be worthy of our worship, but only our fear. But it IS so. It is so. And for that good news, that very good news, thanks be to God indeed. Amen.