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Sure Foundations, Part I

Matthew 7:24-29 NRSV “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 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. 26 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. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!” 28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Psalm 46 NRSV God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Today’s parable from Jesus is yet another of those scriptures – like the one we heard from Revelation a few weeks ago about the river in the heart of the city – that makes us now flinch a little, doesn’t it? For in the storms of last month we encountered Jesus’ words in a visceral way, didn’t we, as we saw so many houses come down from the raging waters? When Barbara and I lived in a tiny town on the Big Island of Hawaii, winter would sometimes bring rainstorms of such power that you did not want to drive after dark because of the landslides that could happen without warning and in an instant along the highway to Hilo that cut through the oceanside hills; in fact a friend of ours was nearly killed that way one late night driving home.¹ And the power of the shifting of water and land is the Big Island’s constant companion in another way too; in living memory there have been two immense tsunamis that wreaked destruction on that hard-scrabble island, claiming lives and destroying hundreds of homes and businesses. A final example of the power of water: each year, as many of you know, my friend Bob

Mike Leidemann , “Big Island roads are deadliest in Hawai’i,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 27, 2005, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2005/May/22/In/In08p.html> See also, from the same issue and by the same writer, “Landslide almost killed him,” <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2005/May/22/In/In09p.html>

Hill and I do a continuing education road trip together, where we drive through the desert southwest carrying on long conversations about church and ministry. But I can still recall how our words suddenly ceased in wonder the first time we gazed upon Monument Valley, a mute and word-defying vista that indeed in its own way testifies to the awesome power of wind and water and time to shape the land.

The incredible forces that can indeed come with the right mixture of water and wind are indeed almost beyond words sometimes. And it is not by chance, then, that Matthew records Jesus as choosing this profound and powerful image of a house and its owner terrifyingly facing the forces of wind and rain to talk about the life of faith. For this image would have been an especially apt one for the community to which Matthew was writing. For you see, Matthew's gospel was written in about the year 80, and he was concerned that his flock not be taken in by false teachings in the midst of what was a hard and scary time. The Roman Empire had just destroyed the city of Jerusalem, leaving the people terrified and dispirited – and such times are always times when folks can be tempted to grab onto anything that might look solid but which actually is not. Matthew, therefore, was focused on making sure that the band of Christians he was helping to lead held onto the right understanding of the faith, the right understanding of Jesus, the right understanding of the gospel. Something truly solid that would not shift. How does Matthew do this? Well, at every turn Matthew paints Jesus as a new Moses. And just as *Moses* brought a set of teaching to a people living hard and scary lives, so too has *Jesus* brought a set of teachings about the Living God that can anchor us and give us a secure foundation when times are hard.

Before we go further, let me take a little detour and ask you: do you remember what Jesus's final words in Matthew's gospel are, spoken to his disciples? "*Go therefore and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to*

the end of the age.” These lines go by the name “The Great Commission,” for they are, if you will, Jesus’s instructions, Jesus’s commission, to all of us. But have you ever noticed what is **not** on the list here? Jesus says this: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. He doesn’t say go and feel for people. He say go and have sympathy for their plight. He doesn’t say go and start a support group for them. Now none of these are bad things, but in Jesus’ last will and testament, as it were, they are not the **key** things. No, one of the key things is that the disciples are to do – and we, now, as their heirs, are to do – is to **teach** people. We are to teach them **well**. And that also means that you and I are to have a profound skepticism for those teachings that would try to claim **us** that are wrong or hurtful or blasphemous. **Teach well and be taught well.** That is what that phrase in the Great Commission boils down to.

And, to return from our detour, that is precisely the tie-in with our scripture today, for did you catch it in that description of the house and the wind and the rain: *“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.... Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.”* It was with that very same **authority** that Jesus sent the disciples and sends us to teach, as he put, *“all that I have commanded you.”* In the midst of scary times, in the midst of worries and wonderings, in the midst of the worst that the storms of life can throw our way, we are to secure our houses on the foundation of all that Jesus commanded us, **and** we are to teach those around us that they too might have a secure foundation as well.

But that’s precisely where the task feels so daunting sometimes, doesn’t it? “Teach them to observe **all** that I have commanded you.” Build your lives – and teach others about how to build their lives – on the foundation of **all** that Jesus taught so authoritatively. And we may understandably ask: How do we do that? I don’t know

about you, but I need a yardstick or summary of what the authentic teaching for the sure foundation of a Christian life is. Sometimes even though you appreciate the many trees in the forest, what you need is simply a map of the forest itself so you can indeed see the forest for the trees! And Jesus himself actually supplied that yardstick, that summation. Because later in the gospel of Matthew, He gets asked precisely this question about how the good news can be summed up. Do you remember his answer: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”* (Matthew 22:37-40). In other words, if you would seek a life that is indeed lived on a sure foundation, then the summation of the gospel, the teaching that you should live by, is love God and your neighbor.

So let’s explore that a little. And I want to talk about how this summation can indeed function as a yardstick by which to measure anything the claims to be a true teaching about God, because if we are to both have and teach about faiths’s sure foundations we can use this summary as a test for what kinds of things truly are in harmony with the Gospel and which ones are not. That first one seems simple, and yet is deeply profound: *Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul*. Two things I want to suggest here. First, it’s oh-so-clear that God has given us minds. It’s one of the delights of our existence. Finding things out, learning new things, discovering a new idea – all of these are delightful experiences. If you have forgotten that, just find yourself a three-year old to spend some time with. And it also means that those folks who would tell you that you ought not use your mind to think deeply about God are mistaken. And yet I have sometimes run into folks – have you? – who say that it is somehow “dangerous” to use academic and scholarly tools to think about God. When I

was a Regional Minister, I used to run into folks who didn't want young people from their church going to seminary because it would somehow "destroy" their faith to be exposed to new ways of looking at the Bible and the gospel. But in my experience, that is just not correct: using our minds to study God's word deepens our faith, or at least it has mine. Discovering, for example, that each of the gospel writers is telling of the same Jesus but that each is writing to very different audiences deepens my appreciation for just how compelling the gospel is, even with all the different ways it is told.

Second, this summation from Jesus reminds us that there is a difference between love and placation. What do I mean? Well, you placate a bully. You love a friend or a parent. And this tells us something very crucial about how we should evaluate any statement about God and that crucial thing is this: God's love is unconditional. God loves everyone. God's love is perfect. Unlike *our* love, even for those we are closest too, *God's* love doesn't get tired or have a bad day. And God even loves those people whom we find it hard to love. *But that's good news.* God loves everyone. Period. And what that means for you and me is that both when we are teaching through our words or our actions, or when someone around us or the culture or the television or the movies are trying to teach us, we need to use that yardstick to know whether that teaching is indeed of God. For example, I have heard people say – and so have you – that certain kinds of people, certain classes of people, certain races or nationalities are not really loved as much by God as other people. Or, to take an example that pops up now and then, what do you say about those who maintain that at the end of time there will be a "rapture" and that a handful of people will be saved and go live with God and the entire rest of the world will die a terrible death? To me, that is not a God who loves all, but in fact blasphemes a God whose deepest desire is that all would know Him. I have a cousin who once sported a bumper sticker on his car that

said “In case of the rapture, this car will be unmanned.” And he would talk about how he didn’t care – and God didn’t care – that his suddenly driverless car would likely cause an accident. But apply the yardstick here: Is this an authentic and authoritative teaching? No, I don’t think so. It would be very difficult to love a God who was that kind of God.

And take the second of Jesus’ summations, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Again, this provides a concise and precise yardstick for measuring the truth of what we teach in our words or actions, or what the culture is trying to teach. And also again, it tells us something about God: that not only does God love each and every one that He has made, he also demands that we do justice to each and every one that he has made. And that is an excellent touchstone and yardstick indeed. It means that when we hear of laws and practices and customs, for example, whose effect is to make certain people second-class, then we know that that can’t be what God intends. Because such things are not an expression of the neighbor we are called to love and they’re not in line with a God who expects fairness for everyone He has made. And so when in California and Hawaii and other places laws were made that excluded Chinese and Japanese from owning property, those were not expressions of a just God. And when laws or practices or customs today have the effect of making some people second-class, of institutionalizing fear of the stranger and the immigrant, then they are not an expression of loving the neighbor and they are not in line with the God whose desires justice for all.

The first year that we lived in California, I got called to jury duty. And I ended up on a jury in a civil trial that lasted nine weeks! At issue was a builder who had built dozens of houses and who didn’t (we on the jury decided) adequately secure their foundations in the sloppy California soil and who knew that he didn’t and who had

hoped to get away with it. And the homeowners showed pictures of their houses: over the course of a year the houses would shift up and down on their foundations as much as twelve inches! They were a living example of what happened when the foundation was built, as the scripture put it, on sand. Now, there are times that you and I find the rooms in the houses of our own lives threatening to shift up and down. In the midst of illness, or economic problems, or family problems, or other worries, we find storms that would threaten. And it is precisely at such times that you and I may be most prone to over-simple formulations that don't strengthen our foundations but in fact make the house more rickety. Those are the times we may be tempted to lash out in fear against those who are "different." It is precisely on such occasions that we need to remember Jesus's twin touchstones by which to sum up and know the essence of the gospel: that indeed God loves each and all and asks that **we** behave and believe in ways that express that love and never a hateful or exclusionary view of God, AND that God demands justice for each and all and asks our best efforts to do right by all those neighbors that God has made. And as we do so, we remember this: Jesus has promised not that the house won't shake or that the storms won't come, for the sometimes will indeed, but in His love and in His mercy and in His justice Jesus will indeed be with us always, even, as He told us, to the "end of the age."