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Sure Foundations, Part 2 - Avoiding a Terrible Mistake

(Mat 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."

(Rom 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."

There is an old preacher's joke that goes like this: A congregation called a new preacher. And on the preacher's first Sunday there, she preached a great sermon, full of life, excellent bible interpretation, memorable stories, and an eloquent call to action for the hearers. Everyone thought it was great. The following Sunday, she preached the exact same sermon again. There was a little puzzlement among the congregation, but no one said anything – "She's just moved here and maybe in the midst of all the stress she just forgot." The third Sunday, she again preached the exact same sermon as on the first Sunday. *Now there was lots of rumbling: "It was a good sermon the first time, but what's going on?!?"* Finally, on the fourth Sunday, she did it again: she preached the very same sermon. Well, the board had a special meeting after church and asked her to explain herself and why she kept preaching the exact same sermon.

She said, “*Well, you all haven’t done what I said to do in **that** sermon yet; why should I preach another one?*”

Well, **this** preacher knows better, but, if you were here two weeks ago, you know that this is the very same scripture – this parable Jesus told about the wise and foolish men and how they built their houses on rock and sand – that I preached on that week. But this is a different sermon, not because I want to be like our apocryphal preacher and say exactly what I said again, but because the more I thought about it, the more that I realized that I was just not finished with this story – or maybe it is that the story isn’t finished with us. And, perhaps more importantly, some conversations that I have had with some of you about that sermon and some hard questions that this little parable raises convinced me that there is more yet to be said about the wise man and the foolish man, about the rock and the sand, about what it means to build your life on a sure foundation – and, most importantly perhaps, what this parable **doesn’t** mean!

Two weeks ago I spoke of how Matthew’s gospel was written to convey the understanding that Jesus is, for Christians, the “new Moses.” The parallels that Matthew paints are many. To name just two: Like Moses, Jesus began and ended his earthly teaching ministry on a mountaintop. Like Moses, Jesus brings a new set of teachings that Matthew understands as following from and fulfilling the ones that Moses brought. And Jesus says that these new teachings are the “rock,” the solid place on which we are to built our lives, the foundation, and that his hearers – and you and I – are to go into the world and teach everything that He commanded, which can be summed up according to Jesus in the dual commands of love God and love neighbor. That’s where we found ourselves two weeks ago. But this morning, what I want to focus on (and then I promise I won’t preach on this scripture next Sunday!) is to address one terrible misunderstanding of Jesus’ parable about the wise man and the foolish man. But before we do that, let’s look just a bit more at the situation to which

Matthew was writing and why this image of the rock and the sand, of the sure foundation, would have been apt for those to whom Matthew was writing his gospel.

Scholars tell us that a large part of Matthew's community was in Antioch, a city in what we now call Turkey. By the time of the 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, were about as solid as whip cream – and also began using stones to build houses. And this combination of both using stones and 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 image of building on the solid rock may not seem particularly novel, to the residents of Antioch this image was indeed fresh and apt because, as one commentator on the scripture puts it, the now “thriving city was full of strong, durable new imperial buildings and blocks of houses constructed on rocky ground, made of stone.”¹

So Matthew's hearers, particularly 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 Matthew, through Jesus' parable, is trying to remind them that building their lives on a

¹Angela V. Askew, http://www.dfms.org/6087_61515_ENG_HTM.htm

sure and solid foundation, a foundation of rock as the parable puts it, is still not only possible but is what one needs to do in order to experience and know the abiding grace of God.

But here is where the misunderstanding 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 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" rock, 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 folks – and sadly sometimes the voices of folks even in churches – who almost seem to take delight in the misery that some people experience, and are even quick to say that God also is 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 even grieve God 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.** Rains WILL fall in your life and mine. Storms WILL come. The houses of our lives WILL shake. And *sometimes* that shaking could have been predicted; there is 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. If you eat nothing but pork rinds and cheese whiz for a month there will be predictable consequences.

But here is the point: the fact that actions generally 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 made and the consequences from how the house was built will it will shudder and shake and even fall down sometimes. But does that mean that **God** has willed those bad things for your or me? No. How does Paul put it there in Romans, our other scripture for today? "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.*" That doesn't mean that God doesn't seek to do good things even for bad people. In fact it may be precisely in lives that are shambles and even hurtful that God is trying to bring out good. 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 down. 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 re-build 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 not to say that God is somehow pleased by that.

So 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 seeks to destroy those houses. How might we sum all this up? Well, let me suggest once again the following 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" for that reason?** I have found that that little test cuts through so much bad theology and can remind us so much of why God is worshipful – not simply a powerful 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" his children and 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.

Two weeks ago I told you about the nine-week jury trial I served on in California where we determined that the builder had on-purpose built the foundations of houses in a shoddy manner causing those houses to shift up and down and up and down over the course of the seasons. How did he do that? Well, 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 indeed the builder was liable and 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 image 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 everyone whom God has made. God delights when our foundations prove strong and continues 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.