

“ON ROCK OR SAND”

Matthew 7:24-27

September 6, 2020

Rev. Jerry Duggins

Words matter... but what we do with words matters even more. When we planned this series on parables for a pandemic I said to Janet that I thought this one would be good for concluding the series. All the parables we've discussed so far encourage Jesus' hearers to certain actions: to be a neighbor, to seek the lost, to wait in readiness, to come to the banquet. The parables are not just stories about the nature of the kingdom of God, but they are calls to action, calls to live out the kingdom. As stories or images they offer interesting insights, but unless they move us to think and behave differently they are just sand that will not support the house when the storms come. Hearing what Jesus says is important, but doing what he says makes the difference between foolishness and wisdom.

So let's begin with the words of Jesus. There are three images here: the house, the rock and the sand. One of the mistakes often made in hearing this parable is to think about the house as "my house." We are so used to thinking about things in terms of the individual. Certainly we each have our own faith, our own spiritual journey, but such faith is shaped by others, and the journey is filled with companions. So when Jesus talks about a house, he's not talking about a single person dwelling, but a house for the family. The Greek word used here can even be translated as household or family. Given that this image is his conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, I would say he has the whole community of faith in mind with this image.

The sermon is a series of instructions directed to his disciples about how to live in community. It's not enough, he says to refrain from murder. You have to deal with the hate that lies within you. It's not enough to avoid adultery. You have to deal with the lusts within. It's not enough to love those who love you. Healthy community is formed in the loving of one's enemies. Parading your faith before others undermines the community. Finger-pointing only serves to break relationships apart and reveal your own shortcomings. These and other statements in the sermon are the bricks that build the house, the building blocks of community.

The church has always struggled to live out these words of Jesus. Paul refers to factions in Corinth. Squabbles over the nature of Jesus, the doctrine of the Trinity, and free will dominate the early development of Christianity. During the Reformation, churches split over the nature of the elements in communion and the right understanding of baptism. I'm not suggesting that thinking about these things is irrelevant in the life of the faith community. Theology needs to lead to practice. People of faith have murdered Muslims and Jews, tortured heretics, beaten slaves, assaulted women, and bombed abortion clinics.

Of course, it's easy to see the obvious, where the teaching of Jesus seems to have been forgotten, heard but not enacted. What does it look like to turn the other cheek in a culture

too eager to slap the other cheek? When is turning the other cheek prolonging the state of injustice? When is “All lives matter” a genuine concern for all people and when is it an excuse to ignore the centuries of injustice against black people? I am not at all surprised by the proliferation of lies and deception in the political arena, but I’m put out by Church folk who just accept it. I’m appalled that some don’t even recognize “hate speech” or are willing to put up with it for the sake of a “healthy economy.” Jesus had something to say about not being able to love both God and money.

We live in a country building its house on sand. There’s a lot I might say about that but the question that faces us today is what sort of house the church is building. What sort of community are we building? Are we living out the words of Jesus or setting them aside? It wasn’t so many years ago that the Presbyterian Church looked on anyone who wasn’t hetero-sexual as a sinner in need of repentance. This falls in the finger-pointing category for me. But now we are welcoming the LGBTQ+ community into our congregations as friends. In the sixties, many churches participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Recently more and more are returning to this kind of engagement with society in the struggle for racial equity.

If we’re going to be faithful to the words of Jesus, then we will build a church without so many walls, we will hear the cries for justice with hearts of compassion, we will find ways to reach out to those isolated by this pandemic, we will counter hate speech with works of love. And who knows where else the words of Jesus may lead us. We will do this because the house we want to build is a house built on rock. The house built on rock is not a house for ourselves alone, but a house for all who will come.

After Jesus offered the bread and wine to his disciples, he told them to do this in remembrance of me. We understand the sacraments as the word made visible. The words matter... but what we do with the words matters even more. Amen.