Rock Solid

A Meditation on Matthew 7: 21 – 29 Rev. Cathy C. Hoop November 6, 2022

Two weeks ago, yesterday we celebrated the wedding of our youngest son down in Mobile, Alabama at his (now) wife’s beautiful Catholic church. Three weeks before the wedding my son and his fiancé called me and said, “We’re sending you a scripture to look at. The priest needs us to choose the readings for the wedding!” I was a little surprised that this hadn’t been sorted out some time ago, but I opened my text messages, and there was a screen shot of the parable of the two houses.

I love weddings. I love meeting with couples to plan their weddings, and especially to talk together about what readings would be a meaningful focal point of their service. I was a little surprised by this choice, as I guess I lean towards other passages that have a bit more romance (?) to them.

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other…” from Ecclesiastes 4. Or “Set me as a seal upon your heart as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house, it would be utterly scorned.” (Song 8: 6– 7)

When my sister got married, she asked me to preach on the beatitudes! Preaching from the beatitudes is challenging – daunting – on an ordinary day, but when your sister is both an ordained minister and seminary professor marrying another minister and the room will be filled with ministers and professors? I’m not sure I’ve recovered from that one!

The houses built on sand and rock? For obvious reasons It is a text frequently found in wedding planning resources, although Jesus didn’t deliver it as part of a wedding homily. It contains deep wisdom for the life of faith, individually and communally. I’m embarrassed to admit that I can’t remember the Gospel reading from my son’s wedding, but I do remember the creation story (with the borrowed rib) and a *certain* passage from Ephesians. I waited for the parable to be read, but we never got there. Things became a little confusing when everyone’s phones blew up with tornado warnings. The alerts rippled through the beautiful sanctuary, and we all laughed a bit nervously as the service continued. (I know I was also a little worried about whether there might be a basement.) Rain on your wedding day – even a down pour – is supposed to be some kind of good luck, but tornados? Fortunately, they never came.

But get this, one of the readers switched the Epistle reading at the last minute. When the priest came to the pulpit he said, “well that was the wrong epistle lesson, but let’s run with it!” And he did. I’m not sure I could have pulled that off and I really appreciate that no liturgist has ever done that to me.

After that initial conversation with my son some weeks ago, and knowing that today would be a complicated day with the news of my impending move, I thought, “why not?” Maybe this wasn’t the text for their wedding but maybe it would be an excellent text for us today.

Do you remember the “categories” of parables proposed by John Dominic Crossan (*The Power of Parable)* which I have shared with you? He suggests that as we work with a parable, we ask: “Is this a riddle, an example or a challenge?” The fun begins when you realize that your first reaction isn’t necessarily correct. We frequently discover that what we thought was an example might also be a riddle, or what appears to be a riddle is instead a challenge. The parable of the houses? Example parable, right? *This* is how you should live. A life that can survive stormy weather needs a solid foundation, not one that shifts beneath your feet. Not a complicated concept, although we cannot deny that enfleshing our faith does not always come naturally or easily to us. And frankly, this parable is much simpler to digest when we separate it from the words that come immediately before it.

*Not everybody who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. On the Judgment Day, many people will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name and expel demons in your name and do lots of miracles in your name?’**Then I’ll tell them, ‘I’ve never known you. Get away from me, you people who do wrong.’*

Prophecy, exorcism, and miracles. It would seem that if any good deeds could get you into heaven, it would be these. Any *one* of these! But Jesus says, “no,” and then tells the story of the two houses. “Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder,” Jesus says. Which words? Well, he has been preaching and preaching and preaching…and that preaching has included what we know as the Beatitudes…” Blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.” He reminds them of the essential truths of teachings they have always known. “You have heard it said you must not murder, but I say to you that anyone who is angry with another is in danger of judgement.” He doesn’t re-write the law; instead, he spells it out in expansive language. He speaks to them of the *everyday* practice of faith: humility, forgiveness, reconciliation…and love. It is not enough to love your neighbors; you must also love the ones who consider you an enemy. “Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” (Matthew 6:48)

But what about those exorcisms and miracles? Those prophecies? Is this a caution about charismatic demonstrations of faith? Is this a caution about whether the practice of our faith brings attention to ourselves or to God? Were these simply performers, enjoying the fame they earned from their actions? Here we must be very careful because it would be easy - and lazy - to call out big name evangelists who have abused the vulnerable in our day. The harder work is to look at ourselves, and ask, “what would be our claim to fame?” The temptation for us – at Grace – would be to say, “We march! We protest! We are outspoken!” All of those things are true and I’m glad that’s who we are, but we must continually evaluate our actions in light of the law of love.

Jesus’ concern is whether or not these actions - whether they be healing miracles, prophecies or marches - are rooted in relationship. “Anyone who hears these words” – that is the relationship, and that relationship is the foundation. “And acts on them” - the acting on those words, that is the house.[[1]](#endnote-1) We can build on sand or on rock. We have a choice, and we choose to build on a relationship with a messiah whose own life was rooted in both mercy and justice.

We can hold on to the assurance that our foundation is strong, for we have come through a difficult season, adapting, and changing in ways we had never imagined. Who ever dreamed there would be this many Presbyterian televangelists?? We have come through, not because of our cleverness in adapting, but because we believed Christ called us into new ways of being the church. We came through because we stood on solid ground.

We look around us, at the crisis our Methodist friends are experiencing, and we can say, “we’ve been there.” Each day, I see another story about a UMC congregation departing for the new, more conservative branch that is forming. The painful truth is that those who are leaving, just as so many left the PC(USA), are leaving over who someone should be allowed to love, over who should be allowed to serve Christ’s church, over how one may define themself to the world.

Our own denomination was in the news last week. I was thrilled when I opened an email from our Presbytery with amendments to review from the General Assembly. I fear there will be debates over some of these, but my prayer is that they will move forward with a Spirit of love and affirmation. Here is one of the changes being proposed to our Book of Order:

The existing language:

… Because the church is catholic, it strives everywhere to testify to Christ’s embrace of *men, women, and children* of all times, places, races, nations, ages, abilities, conditions, and stations in life.”

The proposed change:

Because the church is catholic, it strives everywhere to testify to Christ’s embrace of all *people* of all times, places races, nations, ages, abilities, *genders*, conditions, and stations in life.”

Did you catch the subtle changes? Vital improvements for those who are excluded by the binary categories of male and female. Wherever “men and women” or “men, women and children” is found, the recommended replacement will be “all people.” Those proposals didn’t make the news. What made the news was the press release stating that, among other changes, the denomination would add a nonbinary/genderqueer category to our congregational reporting forms. Conservative media sources made the quick jump from our liberal practices to the decline of the denomination.

*But our foundation is firm.*

And sadly, what these various news agencies are choosing to ignore, is this harsh truth: the damage of *exclusion* has done far greater harm than the risk of *inclusion* could ever do. Every time we close the church doors to those on the outside, we lose some who were – for the moment at least - still on the inside. When children and youth hear that God doesn’t love certain people, and those very people are their friends, what do we expect them to do?

Our God of relationship calls us into radical partnership, and the world – even other Christians - might mock us. Let them. *Our foundation is firm.*

I am thankful that when this little church in Alabama files its statistical report next year, there will be a place for *all* the members to be counted. They won’t have to leave anyone off…There will be people who are no longer ignored. And that matters. *Our foundation is firm.*

Sometimes the “reformed and ever being reformed” aspect of being Presbyterian doesn’t make sense to others. Relational work is transformative work. That foundation of relationship with a radical savior is what wakes us up.

“Wait a minute!” we say, as we rub our eyes, waking to deeper understanding of God’s love,

“Don’t we need bigger doors so more people can come in?”

“Don’t we need wider windows to let in more light?”

“Don’t we need a longer table so that there is room for all?”

Friends, the foundation is sure and strong, no matter what the world may say about us. With humility, let us continue to allow God’s Spirit to guide us in whatever ways our house, God’s church, can be remodeled with expansiveness, grace and love.

Friends, the future of Grace is shining brightly. There is new work to dare and to do. Embrace God’s promises. Reject fear, for fear does not come from God, but perfect love casts out fear.

Thanks be to God, who is making all things new! Amen and Amen.

1. Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew. Tim Cargal (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville), p. \_\_) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)