

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz

“A Stolen Car”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 16, 2021

Psalm 93:1-5

*The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.
The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.
More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!
Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house,
O LORD, for evermore.*

Matthew 7:24-29

‘Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 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. 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. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!’

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Our gospel lesson today is from the seventh chapter of Matthew beginning at verse 24 through the end. Hear now God's word for God's people, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 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. 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. The rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell. And great was its fall." Now, when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at His teaching for He taught them as one having authority and not as one of the scribes. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Our gospel lesson today is the final verses of Jesus Sermon on the Mount, the great sermon in chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus lays out the core values and guiding principles which serve as the foundation of His ministry. And so, in turn, because these are the foundational pieces of Jesus's ministry, they also serve as the core values and guiding principles for all of us who follow him as disciples. I want to invite us to see the symmetry between the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount and its ending. For Jesus was a very good preacher and He knew the wisdom of ending His message by reiterating the very first point of the sermon. And the point He drives home here at the end of this long sermon echoes the Beatitudes with which the sermon began back in chapter five. The point He drives home here is that the behavior of disciples matter--the behavior of disciples matter. The behavior of disciples--we as disciples, our behavior is what discipleship is all about. And just so we're all clear here, Jesus isn't talking to us about our Sunday morning go-to-church behavior. Jesus is

talking instead to us about our all-the-time behavior, especially those times when we don't think that anyone is looking at us, those times when we hope that no one is paying attention to us.

Now, I'm hesitant to use a story about a driver being pulled over by the police because there are just too many recent problematic examples of police stops. But I think this fictional example really illuminates the point that Jesus is making for us here at the end of his great sermon. And this example makes the point with a bit of humor. The story goes that a police officer pulls over a car adorned with a vast array of bumper stickers that say, "Follow me to church. My boss is a Jewish carpenter. Honk if you love Jesus. Driverless car in case of rapture. Smile, Jesus loves you. Not perfect, just forgiven." And on and on and on. The driver is confused at being pulled over and says, "Officer, what did I do wrong?" And the officer responds, "Well, you've honked at the lady in the crosswalk, you signaled with your middle finger the Toyota that passed you by, and you screamed an obscenity at the car ahead of you at the stoplight. I figured, given your bumper stickers, that the car had to be stolen."

Here, at the end of his sermon, Jesus makes crystal clear that we don't want to be guilty of the same behavior as this car driver. We don't want to be guilty of the faith we proclaim not matching the faith we practice. What we say and do, our talk, and our walk, they need to be the same. For when our faithful actions match our faithful words, we have the firm foundation that Jesus points to in our gospel lesson. A sturdy foundation which serves us well as disciples. A sturdy foundation that makes all the difference. In contrast to a less than sturdy foundation, which I think any of us who have ever built a sandcastle on the shore of the ocean or shore of one of the Great Lakes-- if we built a sandcastle there, we know the consequences of an unstable foundation. A foundation which does not support discipleship.

As Jesus points out, the firm foundation of discipleship, the firm foundation for our discipleship, doesn't magically or easily appear. A firm foundation requires time, and it requires action. A firm foundation cannot be something in our mind only. It is built with the actions of our hands and our feet as we do. The entire Sermon on the Mount, what we've been exploring in recent weeks-- the entire Sermon on the Mount is a call to action. A call to serve others. A call to bring the love of God out from holy books and religious buildings. To bring it out into the world so that it may transform lives through the efforts of our hands and our feet and our hearts. The New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine, who we have been following as a guide through this exploration on the Sermon on the Mount. She quotes a collection of rabbinical sayings to emphasize the teaching which Jesus is offering we disciples hear. The saying goes, "Any anyone whose wisdom is greater than their deeds to what is this one likened? They are likened to a tree with abundant foliage but few roots. When the wind comes, they will uproot it and blow it down. But anyone whose deeds are greater than their wisdom, to what are they to be likened? They are to be likened to a tree with little foliage but abundant roots. For even if all the winds of the world were to come and blast that tree, those winds will not move it from its place." Jesus's message to disciples to us today is, "Abundant foliage is just for show. It looks good, but it offers little. But deep roots, deep roots, which give a firm foundation, they are created and nurtured and continually made strong by knowing what God requires of us and then taking that knowledge and doing something."

The scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, along with the writings of the New Testament, repeatedly proclaim God's expectation for justice, God's expectation for equality, God's expectation for peace, God's expectation for compassion, God's expectation for love. Our knowledge of God's expectations is the firm foundation upon which our daily efforts make God's expectations of reality time after time after time with person after person after person. We are told at the end of our lesson that those who listen to Jesus's sermon were astonished and were impressed with the authority and the conviction of Jesus, of the way he taught. Now, we're not told what Jesus's close circle of disciples thought. We only know what they did. They continued to follow him. They said yes to his expectations. From beginning to end, the emphasis of Jesus's sermon is on proper living and not correct belief. Matthew repeatedly reminds we disciples that we demonstrate our devotion to Jesus as Lord by living out his ethical instructions in how we think and how we talk, and especially, especially in how we act, how we act day in and day out, and especially our actions that share the life and the abundance of God's love with others.

Such actions demonstrate faithful wisdom and are the deep roots, the foundation of rock, upon which God's beloved community, God's kingdom community is built and firmly stands. As we consider our spiritual homework for the week ahead - and I hope we all do consider some spiritual homework - what are we going to do differently, because we have heard God's word today? As we consider this spiritual homework, I think it is important that we get started on our spiritual work in the car, on the way home. Or if we're worshipping today via live stream, that we think about the spiritual homework we need to do the next time we go anyplace. For as we go, we need to consider what impression of who we are and the values we hold. We are offering to those whom we will pass by, that we are offering to those who will witness our driving. Will we appear to be driving a stolen car and so frighten others away from discipleship? Or will our passage so reflect God's purposes and priorities that the lives of those whom we come in contact with will be enhanced, will become more whole so that they are

able to know life abundantly? Jesus tells us it's what we do, not what we say and not what we believe. So, let's go, go and continue to be disciples who do. Amen.