

August 16, 2020

"A Strong Foundation"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 7:24-27

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

You know, we often talk about the gap between the rich and the poor. But with all the arguments now about whether or not to re-open schools, it makes me think that the gap between the educated and uneducated is of even greater and more serious consequence. How can you ever be successful in this life if you don't have a good education? That's why when I first heard what I'm about to tell you, I thought it was a joke. But it's true. And frankly, I can't understand how we continue to put our faith and trust in politicians who show no common sense, and are so out of touch with reality because they pander to a vocal fringe group. So here it is. Two weeks ago, some Chicago area politicians gathered in Evanston, Illinois to ask that the Illinois State Board of Education eliminate history classes at schools statewide. The reason given is that, in their opinion, current teachings lead to a racist society and overlook the contributions of women and minorities. So I guess the Civil War and the fact that a third of a million men from the north died to abolish slavery isn't worthy enough to learn about in their opinion. I guess Susan B. Anthony and the women's suffrage movement isn't worthy enough to learn about in their opinion. I guess George Washington Carver and what he did for Southern agriculture isn't worthy enough to learn about in their opinion. And I guess basic knowledge about the Pilgrims, the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, World War I and World War II, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the landing of a man on the moon... all these momentous events in the human saga that we're supposed to learn from... apparently aren't important anymore and shouldn't be taught. And here's something to think about. One could very well argue that eliminating the teaching of history, might be analogous to the burning of books. That's happened a number of times in the past, all starting with a vocal fringe group that the majority of people at first ignored, but in every case ending up with dire consequences for so many. One, in fact, in recent history. It was the year 1933 and it was done by the Nazis. German poet Heinrich Heine wrote, "Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people." How prophetic was that! Because during the Holocaust, millions of corpses were incinerated so as to remove any evidence of their existence. Philosopher George Santayana's quote comes to mind, "Those that do not learn history, are doomed to repeat it." And David McCullough, distinguished American author and historian, reminds us, "We are the beneficiaries of those who went before us, who built the cathedrals, who braved the unknown, who gave us their time and service, and who kept faith in the possibilities of the mind and the human spirit."

Yes, we are the beneficiaries of the people and events that have gone before us. So, of course, I hope our young people in Chicago and elsewhere continue to learn history. Because education is one of the important pieces necessary to build a strong foundation in this life. And another piece, which is equally or even more important to a strong foundation in life is our spiritual formation. That's why I choose today's parable. For it, too, teaches us about the importance of building a strong foundation.

Now this parable comes at the end of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. So to set the stage for Jesus' point of the parable, let's review some of the promises and teachings of his sermon. "*Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, the humble, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. You are the light of the world. (So) give to everyone who begs from you. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. In everything you do, do to others as you would have them do to you. Forgive others. Do not judge. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Do not worry about your life. Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you.*" These are incredible words for us to live by. And to emphasize that, Jesus finishes with today's parable. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice will be like a wise man who builds his house on a rock. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice, will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain poured, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and it fell, and great was its fall."

And, of course, Jesus' point is that the wise man, or woman, is the one who listens, takes to heart his teachings and promises, and puts them into practice. Yes, his words are meant, of course, to inspire us and be a blessing to us. But, they are also meant to challenge us. Because we know that conventional wisdom can often lead us in a different direction. Conventional wisdom doesn't put much stock into turning the other cheek, or loving your enemies, or gentleness over power and might, or that the meek will inherit the earth any time soon. Conventional wisdom says things like, "In these crazy times we're living in now, I have to look out first and foremost for myself." But St. Paul reminds us that what the world calls wisdom, is folly and foolishness to God. You see, to understand what Jesus is saying requires an unconventional wisdom based on trust and faith in him alone. That's why Jesus gives us these words. They are meant to help us live our lives better, more meaningfully, and yes, more beautifully. The psalmist says, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take

the path that sinners tread. But their delight is in the words of the Lord, and on these words they meditate day and night. They become like trees planted by streams of water, yielding good fruit, and their leaves never wither. And in all that they do, they prosper."

Yes, his words are meant to be the very foundation of our lives. So that when the storms of grief and sorrow threaten to bring you down, you can stand strong and firm on Jesus' words, "Those who mourn shall be comforted." When anger and conflict threaten to tear you apart, you can stand firm on Jesus words, "Blessed are the peacemakers." When someone hurts you and bitterness and resentment pour down on you, you can stand strong and firm in Jesus' words, "If you forgive others their transgressions, you heavenly Father will forgive you." When financial decisions loom large before you, you can stand strong and firm in Jesus' words, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." When someone unfairly mistreats you and the flood of revenge threatens to overwhelm you, you can stand strong and firm on Jesus' words, "Love your enemies. In everything you do, do to others as you would have them do to you." When the storms of doubt, uncertainty and fear about your future threaten to shake your faith, you can stand strong and firm on Jesus' words, "Do not worry about your life. Strive first for God, and all these things will be given you." It is the words and teachings and promises of Jesus that will give you strength and direction and the ability to withstand the storms of this life. When you live on his words, you are like the wise person in the parable who built upon the rock – the rock of our faith – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Oh, and let's not forget the other person in the parable. The one who built on the sand. Anyone, particularly those of us living on Cape Cod, knows better than to build on sand. And Jesus even goes to the extent of calling that person foolish, a fool! Pastor and author J. Ellsworth Kalas asks, "Why such a harsh word (from Jesus)? Calling someone a fool? Just this, *it's all about the value of the house*. If the man had build a chicken coop, we could forgive him for choosing such a questionable foundation. A chicken coop doesn't cost much, doesn't take too long to build. A house, our lives, that's different." You see, every one of us has been given a magnificent, one-time gift of life. And God has given you the materials to build that life – your body, your mind, your talents, your abilities. Now the question is, how and on what, will you build? The wise man cherished his house and built it on the rock. "But," Kalas adds, "That's why Jesus said some people are fools. They just don't realize the value, they just don't understand the importance of the house that God has put in their charge."¹ Until, of course, it is too late. It's too late!

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, "More Parables From the Backside"

So let's listen once again to the words of our rock, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, the humble, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. You are the light of the world. (So) give to everyone who begs from you. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. In everything you do, do unto others as you would have them do to you. Forgive others. Do not judge. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Do not worry about your life. Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you.”*

Amen.

Prayer

O Lord, thank you for your words that give us a foundation for living our lives. With all that is happening around us these days, it is easy to feel like we are on shifting sand. We don't know what the future holds, and that can make us feel uneasy, uncomfortable and afraid. But then again, Lord, we never did know and we never will know what the future holds. But what we do know is that you are our rock – the One who never changes. The One whose ways are always true and just and loving and right. So may we not only hear your words, but may we take them to heart and put them into practice. So that no matter what happens in our lives, we will be secure in your love, in your comfort, in your peace, in your presence. And may the strength we have by standing on you, be as a light and example to those around us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.