

The Wise Man Built His House upon the Rock

Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for August 16, 2015 – Ordinary 20

First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

“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. --- Matthew 7:24-29

Living as we do in this part of Connecticut, we can easily appreciate Jesus' concluding words in the Sermon on the Mount, when he lifts up the contrasting images of a house built upon the rock and a house built upon sand. There's no shortage of rock, or rocks, or solid ground, in this part of Connecticut. It's either solid ledge, or rocks large and small left behind when the last glaciers receded.

Along the Connecticut River or along Long Island Sound, there's no shortage of sand, or at least not-so-solid ground. (I was reminded of this on Wednesday, when I walked out into the middle of the Connecticut River on the Haddam Meadows sandbar.) Among other things, Superstorm Sandy reminded us that it's not wise to build too close to the shore. It's just like Jesus said two thousand years ago: if you're foolish enough to build your house on sand, then don't be surprised when a big storm strikes and your house is swept away.

Jesus is not, however, talking about architecture or engineering or **home** construction. He's talking about **life** construction. He's talking about the right way, or ways, to live: not only by **hearing** his teaching, but also by **practicing** his teaching.

There have been many Christians through the ages, from famous theologians to ordinary believers, who have found it challenging to try to practice Jesus' teaching—especially his clear and unambiguous teaching about such matters as non-retaliation and love of enemies. And I would agree: it's not easy not to retaliate; it's not easy to pray for your enemies.

By the same token, there have been many Christians through the centuries who have tried, and succeeded, to practice Jesus' teachings, even the most challenging ones. A contemporary example for me is Glen H. Stassen, who taught Christian ethics for nearly half a decade at various universities and seminaries until his death last year at age 78. Although I never studied with Professor Stassen, he has had a significant influence on me through his published writings. His 2006 book *Living the Sermon on the Mount – A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* has been especially helpful to me in my own struggles through the years with the Sermon on the Mount. Here is his testimony to living the way of Jesus:

“Many of us have found that living a life of hostility, bitterness, and resentment toward others, or a life of deceit and not telling the truth, or a life of worrying all the time about prestige and what others think of us, or a life of always wanting more money [or stuff] for ourselves, or of condemning others,...is much harder than just living the way of Jesus.”¹

1 Glen H Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount – A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco:Jossey-Bass, 2006), 188.

Glen H. Stassen didn't just wake up one morning and come to this conclusion. He spent a lifetime thinking about the way of Jesus, trying to practice the way of Jesus, teaching and learning from his students, reading what other scholars and thinkers and ordinary people have had to say about the Sermon on the Mount and the way of Jesus. Which is why he can conclude: "Many of us have found that living a life of bitterness...is much harder than just living the way of Jesus."

So what does it take to live the way of Jesus? It takes, among other things, hearing what he says, trusting what he says, doing what he says. It takes, among other things, a community of like-minded folks to help us along the way, to encourage us when we succeed, to forgive us when we fail, to hold us accountable when we act in ways that are clearly contrary to the way of Jesus. Let me put it this way: I've come to the conclusion that the Sermon on the Mount is first and foremost an owner's manual about how to practice life together in religious community.

As I've probably said before from this pulpit, I'm appreciative of how you in this church have life together in religious community. I'm appreciative of your willingness to go the second mile with one another. But in today's world, I'm not so sure that being a caring community is the full expression of Christian faith and practice. Listen to this testimony by Erin Wathen, a young clergywoman in the Christian Church (Disciples):

"I grew up in church; always loved the church, even when it hurt me; and, for the most part, still find comfort and meaning in the traditional elements that carry baggage for other folks. I love the hymnal. I love a good old sanctuary built in the 50's, before architecture got so "cool" and sterile. I love nighttime meeting (sometimes); with the coffee brewing, the lighted window warm against the dusk; and the faithful gathered 'round Robert's rules of order and opening with a word of prayer. That is my version of a Norman Rockwell poster.

"And Lord knows, I do love a potluck.

"If I'm being honest, a lot of that is why I'm still here. For me, church is about community, comfort, belonging and—at least a little—the ritual of shared and embodied story.

"But that's not enough. It isn't enough for me, and if none of those trappings of the faith hold meaning or memory for you, it's certainly not enough for your life.

"I want to be upfront about my attachment to certain elements of church life, because it is important to separate those comforts from actual belief in God, faith in the gospel, and commitment to be a disciple of Jesus. If the Church is going to survive for another generation, we've got to acknowledge that all these great things about community life aren't especially meaningful to the folks with no institutional memory. Or those whose institutional memory is not quite so cozy.

“So why am I really still here—beyond the happiness of a fellowship hall that smells like coffee and brown-n-serve rolls? For one, because God talks to me. Seriously. That right there is probably reason enough for lots of folks to disregard anything else I say—but it’s the truth. I hear the voice of God on a regular-enough basis to believe that God is still at work in the world; and that I have a place and a purpose in that work. And so does everybody else. And Church is how we find out, together, what that work might be.”²

Church is how we find out, together, what God's work might be, and what our place and purpose in God's work might be. For many of us mainstream Christians, however, this can be a surprisingly hard thing for us to do. We're not accustomed to talking with each other about what we believe, about what kind of relationship we have (or don't have) with God. We are do-ers rather than talk-ers—which is not a bad thing. But sometimes it's not enough. We don't want to be perceived as pushy or smug or in-your-face about our faith...and so we may choose silence over honest conversation about God, about how we might discern God's work in the world, about how we might discern our place and purpose in God's work.

Matt Fitzgerald, who is a (relatively young) UCC pastor in Chicago, told this story in Thursday's “Daily Devotional”:

“I went to a new dentist recently. He asked me what I do for a living. I told him. He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'A pastor. Let me ask you something. Do you believe in evolution?’

The man was about to stick a needle in my mouth. I would have said I believed in unicorns if it made him happy. But it was easy to say 'Yes, of course I do.'

“The dentist looked annoyed. He didn't get my goat. I felt proud of my ability to straddle the fence between the claims of faith and the laws of science.

“Of course there are better ways to get under a liberal Protestant's skin than asking about Darwin. He could have asked me about the incarnation. Evolution is a one-word answer, 'Yes.'

“But if someone asks me about Christ's identity at 10:30 on a Tuesday morning in the dentist's office? I'm going to bob and weave, hem and haw. That's too bad, but it's the truth.”³

2 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/irreverin/2015/08/h-jesus-says-7-reasons-im-still-a-christian/>

3 http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotionals_atheist_dentists_and_smug_christians?utm_campaign=dd_aug13_15&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist

Now, I sympathize with Matt Fitzgerald. You don't want to disagree with your dentist when she or he is about to stick a needle in your mouth. (Fortunately for me, my dentist is a member of an Episcopal church in Guilford, and he knows what I do for a living, and I think he respects what I do for a living and would probably never ask me if I believe in evolution.)

How might you respond if you should find yourself in similar circumstances? Your dentist is about to stick a needle in your mouth, and she says to you, "So I understand that you attend the First Congregational Church in Haddam. Tell me, you and the other people who go to this church, what do you believe?"

Assuming you have to answer this question in as few words as possible, let me offer this suggestion: We believe that God calls us to walk together in the ways of Jesus, by loving God and neighbor, and caring for God's creation. Let me repeat this as a mission statement for this church: We believe that God calls us to walk together in the ways of Jesus, by loving God and neighbor, and caring for God's creation.

This "mission statement," if you will, seems straightforward enough on the surface. But when we dig a little deeper, it can become both more complex and more beautiful. Here is what I mean. We affirm, in the United Church of Christ, that God is still speaking, followed by a comma. If God is still speaking, then God is still speaking to us. Which leads naturally to the question: Are we listening?

The young clergywoman I quoted earlier, Erin Wathen, didn't say how God talks to her, and what she learns from this conversation. But it wouldn't surprise me if she were to say that God talks to her through the book of scripture, through the book of nature, and through other people in her life. At least, this is how God speaks to me. I'm not convinced I always understand what God is saying to me: but at least I'm trying. What I do think I'm hearing is that God's work in the world is the same as it always has been: calling us as believers to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly together. At the same time, how we join ourselves with the work of God is not the same as it was three hundred years ago, thirty years ago, or even three years ago.

For me as a Christian, I hear God speaking primarily, though certainly not exclusively, through the story of Jesus, Jesus who is both the Beloved Son of God and the Living Word of God. And what I hear God saying, not only me but also to the church, is that when we build a life by hearing, and doing, the words of Jesus, we are like the wise woman who built her house upon a 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.