

Home on the Rock
Matthew 7:24-27
February 12, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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*I'm buildin' my home on the Rock, on the Rock. I'm buildin' my home on the Rock of Jesus.
Buildin' my home on the Rock, on the Rock. Children, listen to the word of the Lord.*

That is one of my favorite anthems, and I asked the choir to sing it today because it contains the sum and substance of today's scripture. Build your home on a solid foundation, on a rock. It's a great image: Two houses, one built on a rock and one built on sand. Jesus says,

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 great was its fall.

What is the rock Jesus is talking about here? He says it is his words, but which of his words are the foundation? We could understand this just to refer to the Sermon on the Mount itself, since this passage comes right at the end of that sermon. If so, then our rock includes all the beatitudes, the Lord's prayer, the admonition to turn the other cheek in the face of anger, the charge to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, the reminders that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, the challenge to store up only heavenly treasure, the reminder to consider the lilies of the field. All these teachings and more are in the Sermon on the Mount, as Matthew presents it, and surely Jesus is asking us to take these words to heart, to begin to build our lives on these foundational precepts, and that would be a challenging task right there. Turning the other cheek and praying for our enemies don't come naturally to us.

But Jesus' teachings go further. The whole rest of the gospel is really a fuller explication of this beginning sermon, and his life and death are a demonstration of the cost that can come from living into the Kingdom of Heaven, which is coming now into this world, even as earthly powers resist that in-breaking. So, Jesus may mean that we are to take ALL his teachings to heart, to build our lives upon them.

And Matthew, the gospel writer, would probably go even further. This gospel – more than any other – presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures. Right here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come, not to abolish them, but to fulfill them." If we understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the great narrative arc of the Hebrew Scriptures, then his admonition to build our lives on the solid foundation of his words must in some sense include those ancient texts as well. Well, there's a challenge for us all!

If we are going to build our lives upon a solid scriptural foundation, first we have to know what the Bible says. That is a daunting task. And it is why I spend each fall telling again the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. I hope I recount them in a compelling way so that you will remember Eve and Hagar and Miriam and Ruth and Esther, right alongside Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; Joseph and Moses and Joshua and David. And then each spring we focus on one of the gospels, each with its own special flavor. If you have been with us for the past couple of years, then you have heard me say more than once that the Gospel of Luke is a social justice gospel, focused on God's commitment to those who are poor and hungry, and Jesus' invitation to us to be on God's side in working for justice for the oppressed. And you have heard me preach more than once about the feeding of the 5,000 with five barley loaves and a few fish. We have to know the Bible stories if they are to be the solid foundation for our lives.

Now, Bible stories were the language of my childhood. I learned Old Testament stories and New Testament parables from my grandmother, and in Sunday School, and Vacation Bible School, and brush arbor revivals, and sitting through really loooooong sermons on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening each week. The stories found their home in my heart.

I will be 73 years old next month, and I am pleased to say that those Bible stories don't mean the same thing to me now that they did when I first learned them. My understanding has deepened and matured over time. I always learn something new when I revisit a familiar text. Those same stories reverberate in new ways in my life. This is why I love the Bible Study group so much. I always learn something new, not only from the scripture itself, but also from what the other members of the group have to say as they encounter the text of the week. You should join us!

Some of you, I know, learned Bible stories as a child, as I did. But even if you are still a seeker and have never studied the Bible for yourself, some of those beautiful words have been floating around in your vicinity in our culture, and you have introjected them as well. They are there for all of us to call on. When the rains come down in our lives and the floods come up, and we don't know how else to pray to God for safety and comfort, the words of the Lord's Prayer will always come to us. Or we will hear an echo of the 23rd Psalm – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Even if we can only get that far into it, the comfort of that familiar passage will be there for us in the most challenging moments. It is a solid rock that we can stand on. Perhaps you find solace in nature when times are bad. Maybe you take a walk outside in this beautiful corner of Creation and from somewhere you hear the psalmist say, "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." When you are worried, do you hear Jesus' gentle voice say, "Consider the lilies of the field. They toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I tell you that Solomon

in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these”? Do you feel comfort there in God’s care for you, you who mean so much more to God than wildflowers? Or, in the very worst of times, when the floods are really rising all around, perhaps, like me, you hear the words of Psalm 46 come to comfort you: “God is my refuge and my strength, a very present help in times of trouble.” The more we know the words of scripture, the more available they are to us when trouble comes to call.

But there is a catch here. Jesus doesn’t only say that we are to listen to God’s words. He says we are to put them into action. Well! That’s a little more challenging, isn’t it. The guidance we find in scripture about how we are to live our lives is pretty simple and straightforward. Simple to understand, but not always easy to do. And it is the doing, Jesus says, that builds the solid foundation for our lives. Consider two examples, one from Hebrew Scripture and one from the gospels.

The prophet Micah writes, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Just these three things. So simple to understand. Not so easy to do. Do justice, Micah writes, meaning we are to work for an even playing field for those who never get a fair shake. Not just a hand-out when they are in need, but a changing of the rules of society and the economy that disadvantage them from the start. That’s Biblical justice. The story of Jesus’ life is enough to show us that working for Biblical justice is a dangerous business in a world that benefits from injustice. Build your house upon a rock, Jesus tells us. Do justice, even if it causes trouble for you.

Consider Jesus’ own teaching: An expert in the law comes to Jesus and says, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus turns the question back to him: “What does the law say?” The man responds, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says, “That’s right. You will have eternal life.” But the man wants to quibble. He wants limits to his obligation to care for others, so Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan, showing that knowing the law is not enough. You have to be willing to go across the road to touch the person who has been injured, even risking contaminating yourself and costing some of your own money to help her.

Learning the word of God is just step 1. Acting on what we learn in scripture is step 2. Without that second step, without a deep and abiding commitment to DOING justice and showing our love for our neighbor even when it is costly to us, without that action, our house is still built upon sand. As the Book of James puts it, “Faith without works is dead.” For, if we know what God requires of us but don’t do it, then when the rains come down in our lives and the floods come up, as they surely will, we will not be able to look ourselves in the mirror.

At the end of our lives, we will each come to greet our Creator. God will welcome us all home, and we will have the opportunity to say how grateful we are for the gift of this time on Earth, for the people we have loved and who have loved us, for the adventures we have had. And somewhere in that conversation, we will ask ourselves, or God will ask us, “Did you do justice? Did you show mercy? Did you show love to all those you met? Were you courageous in putting the word of God into action in your life, even at your own cost?” If we can answer yes, then our house has truly been built on a firm foundation. I don’t know about you, but I’d like a few more chances to get it right, please.

Well, I’m happy to tell you that God isn’t finished with any of us yet. I know that, because we are all still here. We worship the God of second chances and third chances and last chances. We all still have the opportunity to put God’s words into action in whatever time we have before us. Let us help each other to do just that.

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Amen