

Building a Foundation
Matthew 7:24-27
June 24, 2007
Kory Wilcoxson

When I was in seminary, we hosted a group of Buddhist monks who spent a week making a mandala. A mandala is an intricate work of art depicting symbols of Buddhism made completely out of colored sand. These monks spent hours leaning over a round table, painstakingly placing grains of sand into this picture. At the end of the week, the finished product, about 10 feet across, was elaborate and visually stunning. The monks carried the mandala down to the local creek and poured the sand into it, letting their art infuse the local ecological community. The beauty of the mandala was in the joy of creating it, but in just a few minutes, all the sand was washed away.

A few summers ago, my family and I spent about a week in Ireland. One of the things that struck us about that country was how old it was. We saw a monastery at Clonmacnoise which dated back to the 800s, and a wall built by the Romans that predated Jesus. When I touched it, I imagined the Roman worker who put it that stone in place over 2000 years ago. These rocks had been there for centuries, enduring all kinds of weather, and yet stood firmly in their place.

Our parable for today contrasts these two diverse formations. Jesus tells us about two men who build houses. Notice, he doesn't say anything about the houses themselves. They could have been shacks or mansions. They may have been starkly different or exactly the same. One may have had a car port and the other a man cave. We don't know. What we do know is that they were built on different foundations: one on rock, the other on sand. When the storms come, one house washes away like the Buddhist mandala, while the other one stands firm like the Roman wall.

Jesus tells this parable at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. This sermon is one of the longest discourses we have from Jesus, in which he teaches the crowds who have gathered what it means to be a follower of Christ. This is where we get the Beatitudes – blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek. This sermon is where Jesus talks about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek. It's here we learn from Jesus the Lord's prayer and hear him say, "Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be, also." It's also here where Jesus says, "Judge not, lest you be judged" and gives us the Golden Rule to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. He may have gone a little bit over 20 minutes, but it was totally worth it.

So how do you end such a powerful sermon? Jesus says, "Everyone who hears these words and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." Jesus prefaces the parable by saying just because you can say "Lord, Lord" doesn't mean you're a shoe-in for his inner circle. There's a difference between speaking his name and doing his will.

The image of the wise and foolish builders would have resonated with Jesus' listeners. Jesus was a carpenter, so he knew a little something about building houses. The area of the world where he lived and did his ministry often experienced dry seasons and rainy seasons. During the dry seasons, dried-up riverbeds seemed to be a great place to build a house. That is, until the rainy season. If a person built a house in the sand of a dry riverbed, when the rains came, even if you had a sump pump and a backup sump pump,

the house would be washed away. Building on sand was a lot easier and more convenient than digging deeper down below the sand and building on rock, but it had its consequences. How the houses were anchored determined how long they lasted in the storms. Now, you may think that's the point of the parable and of this sermon. Stay anchored in Jesus and you'll weather life storms. Sounds like a nice thing to crochet on a pillow, doesn't it? But we have to ask the next question, we have to go deeper into this story. We have to wonder what it means to be anchored in Jesus.

It feels like the right answer is to pray to Jesus, to read our Bible, to go to church, to do all the things we've been taught to do to be a good Christian. But notice, Jesus doesn't say anything about that. Well, that's not true. He says those things are half the battle. "Everyone who hears these words of mine," he says. So we have to listen to Jesus – through prayer, through the Bible, through worship. But the second half of that sentence is the real kicker – "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them." That's the wise person. The foolish person is the one who hears the words and doesn't act on them.

I was seeing a physical therapist recently about some knee pain I was having. She showed me some exercises I needed to do that would help. She said, "Do these three times a day, then come and see me in a week." I went to see her in a week, and she asked, "How's your knee?" "It hurts." "Did you do the exercises I showed you?" "No." "Well, that wasn't very smart, was it?" "No." "So, what do you think will make your knee feel better?" "Doing the exercises." She said, "You're smarter than you look." I heard her words, but I didn't act on them. Foolish.

What words of Jesus should we act on? Well, remember this parable comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, so that's probably a good place to start. Jesus says blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek. Jesus talks about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek. Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer and says, "Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be, also." He tells us, "Judge not, lest you be judged" and gives us the Golden Rule to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. "Anyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them is wise." How are we doing in acting out these words, in loving our enemies, in counting the poor among God's blessed, in treating others as we would want to be treated? Are we wise or foolish?

I believe Jesus closes the sermon this way because he knows our propensity to focus on ourselves, and when we do that, we focus on the storms in our lives, which makes them seem bigger and bigger. When I was first dealing with my knee pain, I remember thinking, "What if I can never run again? What if it has to be replaced? What if they have to amputate from the waist down?"

Now, I don't mean to trivialize our storms, because we've all faced some hellacious monsoons. But something happens when we take that inward focus and turn it in a different direction. If I have spent time serving others, working with others, seeing God in others, then my life and storms are put into perspective. My knee pain carries a different meaning after I've served lunch to a man in a wheelchair. The judgment I'm feeling from someone pales in comparison to how homosexuals or minorities feel. When we focus on the needs and value of others, we build a foundation of humility, of justice, of serving the least of these which gives us spiritual security in the midst of our own storms.

It also reminds us that Jesus is there. When we see how Jesus is working to still the storms of the poor, the meek, even our enemies, we are better able to see Jesus in the midst of our own squalls. When we look for Jesus as we love and serve others, we better train ourselves to see him in our own lives.

After Hurricane Katrina, I took a youth group to New Orleans to do flood relief work. We spent a whole week gutting a house that hadn't been touched since the hurricane. As I worked at the house on Majestic Oaks, carrying out wedding albums and nice clothes and exercise equipment to be hauled away to a landfill, I tried to put myself in the place of the homeowner, a lady named Iris DiCrispino. Iris raised seven kids in that house. She had lived there for decades, and yet didn't even have time to take her most precious possessions with her as she fled from the rising waters. The storms had taken it all away.

A few months after we got back, I got a card from Iris. She was living in another part of Louisiana and was waiting to find out what was going to happen to her house. I expected the tone of the letter to be one of anger or despair, but instead it was nothing but gratitude and grace – for the work we had done, for her own safety, for a house that had served her well. She was obviously a woman of faith, and her words were staked in the hope that comes from faith in Christ. That following April, I got an Easter card from her, telling me she would never be able to return to her home, and then praising God for the gift of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. I thought I was doing Iris a favor by working on her house, but I learned that it was she who was helping me gain perspective on my own storms.

It's important to pray. It's important to read the Bible. It's important to come to worship. But if you end there, you're missing the point, because our faith is not for ourselves. We strengthen our faith when we give it away, using our gifts and resources to serve others. There are no short cuts to a strong foundation. You can't get there all at once. You get there one step at a time, one act at a time.

I want to close with this quote from one of the Old Testament prophets, who channels God's voice to help the Israelites understand what God truly wants from them. Does God want worship? Does God want sacrifice? Does God want someone who knows all the right things to say? Here's what God says in Micah: "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"