

“A House Built with Love”

While perusing the parables this week in trying to choose today's text, I remembered that about six or seven years ago, I attended a preaching conference in Nashville and the emphasis for the week was the Parables of Jesus. After some searching, I came across not only my notes from the conference but also a series of Bible lessons on the parables that I had taught after being inspired there.

It would have been really nice if I had remembered this at the BEGINNING of the summer, when I first started this Sermon Series but finding them during such a busy week was a real serendipity! It brought to mind something that my close friend and colleague in ministry Allyson has to tell me often. "God is never late!"

And while glancing through the notes, the Holy Spirit brought to my mind the parable that we just heard. My personal Bible entitles this parable in Matthew “Hearers and Doers”. The simple explanation is that the rock is symbolic of the word of God, which tells us clearly that we should not just talk the talk but also walk the walk. But as I studied and read other interpretations on this passage, I saw that there is a lot more to Jesus words than this basic lesson.

Jesus tells the folks in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount that there was a wise man who built his house upon some rock and even though the rain fell and the floods came and the wind howled, the house withstood. But the poor, foolish man built his house upon the sand and it slid right into the surf. Not only did it slide but it fell. In fact, it had a great fall, to quote our Lord.

Having grown up with an engineer father and being married to a builder for 35 years, this did not seem like rocket science to me, but since Jesus included it in his most well known sermon, I thought I should dissect it a little and see what it means to us today. So I did.

One way to look at this Jesus' message is that a house built upon God's word will survive even when the rains fall because it has a strong roof. Christian author Max Lucado wrote a beautiful book entitled The Great House of God. Using the Lord's Prayer as a floor plan, Lucado introduces us to a God who desires his children to be so close to him that they live with him – in his house. He then assigns each phrase of the prayer to a different part of the house. The chapter that correlates with the phrase “forgive us our debts . . .” is assigned to the roof and is called “Beneath God's Grace”. And friends, this is why the house built on rock has a roof that can hold up even when the rains fall.

You see every one of us here has a debt that we cannot pay, a sin that we need to be forgiven of. Because no matter how hard we try, we cannot be good enough, faithful enough, generous enough, wise enough or loving enough *all the time* to earn our own salvation. Lucado points out that we are in God's debt when we hurt our neighbors rather than love them. He says that we are in God's debt when we criticize a co-worker or gossip about a friend because this means we are cursing one of God's creations. That when we disregard God by giving glory to the surgeon for healing rather than to God for God's presence, we are in his debt. And I would add that when we reject God's grace by refusing to forgive ourselves for past sins, we are in God's debt. We are all debtors.

Yet, when God sent his son to die on the cross for you and me God said, “I see your sins and I know you are guilty. You owe me a debt! But I am declaring you debt-free”. The theological term for this is justification. But the simple word for it is grace. And grace is what

covers the great house of God that we live in. Grace is what allows us to survive the rains of illness and the storms we face when a loved one dies or the downpour that tries to drown our serenity when we watch our children struggle through divorce or the deep puddles that we must wade in when we make a bad decision yet end up safe. Grace! The roof of the house of God.

But Lucado also says that few people enter a house and say to their hostess, “You have a fine roof there” because the roof of a house is largely unnoticed. It is often taken for granted. Folks will notice a plant on the porch that we paid \$12.95 for at Lowe’s or the \$200 lamp that lights the way, but no one ever compliments a roof that costs thousands of dollars and took someone hours to design and build.

In the same way, the roof, the grace which covers us and protects us from the rains, is the most costly structure of the house. Because it was bought with the body and blood of Christ. Yet, we take it for granted - until the rains come. So if we are to be hearers AND doers of the word, which is the point of Jesus’ parable, then we are called to recognize the grace of God as the costly gift that it is and respond by showing grace to others. By seeing their debts to us and to others, and yet showing grace with our forgiveness when *we* declare *them* debt free.

Jesus also tells us that the floods came but the house built on the rock still stood. That is because it had a strong foundation. And perhaps Jesus’ words call us to think about what OUR foundation is really made of. Do we rely on God’s wisdom or our own egos? Do we consult the word of God for guidance or follow the path that everyone else is on? Do we lean on the foundation of faith that has been built in our lives through parents, grandparents, years of Sunday School, countless sermons and personal experiences or do we decide just to do what is easy rather than what is right.

As I went through the notes of my past teachings on this parable, I came across something I had journaled about that was a beautiful reminder of the peace that passes all understanding that is given to each of us when we let our lives stand on the foundation of faith. It involved a resident at Foothills Community, named Donna Branberg and it impacted her faith so much that she actually asked me to share it with others. I am glad I had written it down in my notes because I had forgotten all about it but I know she would be glad for me to share it with you.

The story occurred when the stomach flu was going around the Community and Donna became quite ill. In fact, she was one of the few who needed to be hospitalized and even when she came home, she just couldn't seem to shake her illness. When she still felt so bad although several weeks had passed, we knew that Donna must not just have a "bug" as we like to call it so she reentered the hospital for tests. After many days in the hospital, it was determined that she had a very minor condition that could be treated with medication and she came home relieved. But instead of getting better, Donna got worse.

So back to the hospital she went a third time. And every time she went, she would stop by my office and ask me to put her name on the prayer board that hung outside my office, coveting the prayers of her brothers and sisters in Christ. You see, Donna's foundation was built on the word of God which promises over and over that God will not leave us or forsake us.

This time, a very grave diagnosis was given. All three of the arteries that go to Donna's stomach were completely blocked. Her only chance of survival was to go in through her groin and put a stent in to open up blood flow to her abdomen and get it working again. Every day Donna's church pastor or I were there, praying with her. Donna told me that she was on prayer lists from coast to coast – literally. And that she felt those prayers so surely that in her mind's

eye, she could see individuals that she knew all over the country praying on her behalf. But the procedure didn't work and the word Hospice started being used. By everyone but Donna.

Of course, we all thought that she was in denial, unable to accept the reality of her condition. So when one doctor told her that there was a SLIGHT CHANCE that they could reach her abdomen by going surgically through her armpit, we knew she would refuse such measures. Donna's husband Bob did not think she should have the surgery. None of her daughters thought she should have it. Her pastors, including me, thought it was too invasive of a procedure for her to withstand and her nurses in the hospital prepared her by telling her how doubtful it was that the surgery would work. But Donna asked for the surgery.

I went by early on Monday morning to pray with Donna and her family. The surgery was to be lengthy so I went to work. Later that afternoon, when I received the news that the procedure had been a complete success and Donna would be home soon, I literally cried! The next day, I saw her other pastor at a Presbytery meeting and we both started to cry. It seems that all of our theological education and pastoral experience was *nothing* compared to the foundation of faith that Donna's house is built on.

Yet, there is still more to this remarkable testament of faith. When Donna came home from the hospital, she told me an amazing story. She said that one night, as she was trying to sleep in the hospital, she felt her husband, Bob, holding her hand. In fact, it was gently lying beneath hers, as if to give her strength and comfort. Her first thought was that Bob had gotten restless or sad and had come to the hospital in the middle of the night and was there with her. But when she opened her eyes, no one was there. Yet, she *felt* the warmth and strength of that hand.

She told me that she was immediately washed over in peace, knowing that everything would be alright. That whether the surgery worked or did not, that God was with her, holding her hand and that all was well. And friends, this kind of faith is the foundation that stands against the floods of life that come our way. A faith that may not give us what we ask for but gives us what we need. And a faith that promises that God is always with us.

Lastly, Jesus tells us that the wind howled but the house on the rock still stood and that is because the walls were so strong. And this is why I felt called to weave the passage from 1 John in with this parable. Because our house, our life with God, is hemmed in, is connected, is surrounded by the love of God. Quite simply put, the theme of John's letter is love but is at its highest point in the verse we just heard, "God is love".

We don't have to wonder, to hypothesize, to guess, to imagine what the love of God is like. We simply look. God has acted IN love by sending Jesus Christ to overcome every destructive and divisive power in our lives WITH love. God is love more than God is power or generosity or goodness. And that love is what protects us from destructive winds.

But Jesus and John also tell us that the walls of love encompass our house are not simply a concept – this love is an action! It is not enough to know about God's love or to think about God's love or even to be moved by God's love. We must live it. We must not just be hearers but doers. And we must believe that even when our lives are broken and that when our efforts at love are flawed, that the foundation of God's word is still strong enough to use us, to carry us, to cast out fear so that our house will stand.

So perhaps each of us is being called to REALLY ask ourselves whether our house is built on the rock or on the sand. How much faith do you really have to trust in God's will, in God's power, in God's strength?

Friends, let us all build our house upon the rock knowing that the roof of God's grace will cover us, the foundation of our faith in God will stand against the floods and the walls of love that surround us will keep us all of our days. Because the reality of life is this: Buildings may fall. Dreams may die. Love may end. But our life with God as our foundation will be a rock that we can always stand on. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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