

The Third Sunday of Pentecost - June 1, 2008  
Queen Anne Christian Church  
Laurie Rudel, Pastor

Text: Matthew 7:21-29

Throughout the week a little song has been playing around the edges of my mind.

Maybe you know it? It goes like this:

The wise man built his house upon the rock . . . .

And the rain came tumbling down

Oh, the rain came down, And the floods came up . . .

And the wise man's house stood firm.

The foolish man built his house upon the sand . . .

And the rain came tumbling down.

Oh, the rain came down, And the floods came up . . .

And the foolish man's house went "splat!"

So, build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ . . .

And the blessings will come down

Oh, the blessings come down, As your prayers go up . . .

Build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is something about this song (and perhaps this morning's text as well) that invites us to some bit of condescension . . . if you know what I mean.

**Things like:** I would never build a house on sand, how silly is that? I mean why didn't that guy consult a soil engineer who could have saved him a lot of expense in the first place.

**Things like:** Every month I put money into savings, you just never know what's around the corner and I want to be prepared.

**Things like:** I just don't understand how some people can . . . you fill in the blank . . .

In our house-crazed culture fueled by the HGTV remodeling shows it is easy to get sucked into Jesus' teaching on the - shall we say - concrete level of things, like foundations and 2x4's and the virtues of double-paned windows and adequate insulation.

Joy Crowley takes a slightly different tack with this text. In her poem she says:

You know, I have this feeling

that the wise man who built on the rock,

had previously built a house on the sand.  
He'd learned that sand meant wasted effort  
and solid rock was the way to go.  
How much wiser that man was  
than the one who built on the rock  
simply because he didn't know  
the sand was there.  
Mind you, for people like me,  
that wisdom is hard won.  
I built several houses on the sand  
before the message got home.  
Maybe that's why I value rock so much.  
At times, I've heard people say  
that they don't know why God  
allows the pain of sin in this world.  
Well, I if substitute *sand* for *sin*,  
I think I have something close  
to an answer.

M. Scott Peck has written many books—the most well-known of which is *The Road Less Traveled*. Fourteen years into his marriage with Lily it hit bottom - not quite the rocks, but bottom. At the time he was leading an overnight retreat for ten participants at a small convent.

Sister Lucia was the guest mistress in charge of the tiny retreat house. She was eighty-seven if she was a day.

That night, after dinner and after Scott had been lecturing all day, several of the retreatants pulled out bottles of whiskey.

Because he'd had a couple of drinks and because he was in a good deal of emotional pain, and because she had such a kindly old face, he found himself sitting at the Sister Lucia's feet telling her that he was feeling badly since he had failed at his marriage.

Sister Lucia beamed, *Oh, that's just wonderful!*

Scott berated himself for drinking and for spilling his guts to this kindly old face and reasoned that the reason she was kindly was probably because she had no brain left. So he spoke once again, more loudly as if she was senile. *No, no, you didn't understand me. I was telling you I've failed at my marriage.*

Again she beamed at him, *Oh, I'm so glad for you!*

By now Scott had become seriously annoyed. He practically shouted at her, *No, no, you haven't heard what I've been saying; probably you've got a hearing problem. You're quite entitled to have a hearing problem at your age, my dear. But, anyway, you haven't understood anything that I've said, so let's just drop the subject.*

*I've heard and understood you perfectly, young man.* She looked at him with keen eyes. *You've been telling me that you have failed at your marriage, and I'm so glad for you. Do you know how terrible it would be never to fail? Oh, that would be dreadful!*

Scott recollected certain people he'd known who felt they had never failed and thought of just how insufferable they were . . . maybe Sister Lucia had some grey matter behind those intelligent eyes.

He goes on to say: *It also occurred to me is was no accident that both Sister Lucia and I were attempting to follow a Lord of Failure, a man executed at an early age in the standard manner of the day as a petty provincial political criminal, spat upon by his enemies and betrayed by his friends.*

He now observes that it was no accident that his marriage to Lily began to considerably improve along about that time. For what happened was that after he concluded that he'd failed at his marriage, on a certain level, he gave up trying to make it work. And that meant giving up trying to change Lily.

It was also around that time that Lily decided she too had failed at the marriage and also stopped trying to change Scott. Further more, Scott suspects that it is no accident that since that time, both of them seem to have done a great deal of changing.

In our text this morning the pivotal verse is this: *Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like . . .*

Jesus offers these words in response to those who have gone about in Jesus' name doing all kind of good deeds. So what is the problem? How have these good-deed doers built on sand? What is lacking here?

Storyteller and theologian John Shea looks at it this way: Jesus' challenge to all of us is to **not** do good-deeds in ways that copy Jesus and enlarge our ego with accomplishment after accomplishment.

Rather, the spiritual truth of this text takes us right back to the very core of our authentic self. This is the part of us that Jesus is after.

Our deeds must, eventually—remember how we are shaped by sand/sin and how we learn to cling to rock—arise out of our particular call to use the particular gifts we have been given to accomplish the very particular things we are to be about for the sake of the world.

To follow Jesus from an inauthentic self is to “take generosity lightly, desire acceptance without change, forgiveness without repentance, grace without discipleship.” (Gaventa)

In other words we can “do” Jesus’ words without ever really hearing them, without living a transformed life. It is like someone who stops drinking but never does the hard work of AA and ends up being proud of stopping but is essentially a “dry drunk”.

When I was a young adult, after my father died, and my first marriage collapsed under its own particular weight of failure, I went back to church. I went back the church I had grown up in, University Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Then, as now in Seattle, it was completely “un-cool” to go to church so I told people that I went to perform - to sing in the choir. I believed that for a long time.

Each Sunday I sat in the choir loft—which in that sanctuary is a long way from the preacher and from which the choir director would sometimes disappear in order to come back with the football score . . . you really do not want to know what goes in choir lofts!—And doodled on my bulletin waiting for the next piece of music to sing.

Gradually, over time, I began to listen to the sermons of our pastor, Jim Stockdale. He talked honestly about the bible . . . about its limitations and its call to service.

Each Sunday his words fell upon my ears like little drops of rain easing all that was cynical in me, gradually thawing my heart frozen in grief for all my sand/sin decisions to that point in my life.

Finally I was done performing. I left the perch of the choir loft and sat in the back of the sanctuary.

Now this is a huge sanctuary so I was still a long way off . . . nothing like here where we create intimacy and spiritual friendship simply by walking in and sitting close to one another week after week.

Then I moved even closer . . . and closer . . . until I knew I needed to follow Jesus right out into the world and work those whom society had deemed to be without merit . . . the homeless . . . the mentally ill . . .

Biblical scholar Beverly Gaventa says, *In reality, to hear Jesus’ words is to be grasped and reshaped by them, to be activated to obey them, to be set by them on a journey of discipleship.* She says, *Jesus’ words have the power to accomplish something. He spoke and things happened. “Your sins are forgiven you.” “Take up your bed and walk.” Stretch out your hand.”*

In Jesus’ world ego-driven sand/sin will not give us a firm foundation no matter what it looks like to the rest of the world. It is our failure that Jesus wants. It is our capacity to say to God, *I give up. Do with me what you will ‘cuz it is not working anymore.*

It is at that moment that the kingdom of God arrives; grace sweeps us up in loving hands and places us down on the rock called Love. And though sand/sin continues to perplex us there is within us a YES that resounds throughout the universe—God, let your will be done. Let your will be done through me.

**Sources:** *The House on the Rock*, by Joy Crowley from **Resources for Preaching and Teaching, Year A**, p. 175-6; M. Scott Peck quoted in **Pulpit Resource**, June 1, 2008, p. 40; Beverly Gaventa, **Texts for Preaching, Year A**, p. 353-4.