

## The Foundation of this House

*Sermon by Cynthia A. Jarvis*

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Acts 3:10-15

Matthew 7:24-29; Luke 6:46-49

“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid: that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

On this glorious Sunday morning, as the faithful summer remnant are joined by the many who have turned like prodigals toward home, weary of a season spent in some far country, we find ourselves together again on the hill. And on this hill, like men and women of old, we have listened to the parable of two builders at the conclusion of Jesus’ first sermon, delivered respectively on the mount and on the plain in Matthew and Luke’s gospels. We have listened, but in what sense have we heard God’s address? The story is not as simple as it sounds. You *must* be home! No more ten minute meditations before hitting the beach or the lake. It is back to serious business with Scripture on Sunday morning.

According to Matthew, because his readership hailed from Palestine, at issue in the parable was the choice of a building site. The wise builder chooses a rocky foundation that is able to withstand the assault of rain and floods and wind. The foolish builder chooses the sandy bed of a wadi, the dry bed of a seasonal river. “When the rainy season arrives with its violent storms,” comments New Testament scholar Douglas Hare, “a wild torrent rushes down the wadi from the hills and engulfs the house. The foolish contractor had chosen an easy building site without considering the consequences of his choice.”

Luke recasts the parable for a wider audience that likely had no experience of such storms, but who knew the unpredictable rise of a riverbed and the overwhelming power of the river’s water to sweep away everything along its banks. At issue for Luke was the excellence of the building. The first house survived the flood because the builder dug deep and laid the foundation on rock. When the river burst against the house, says Luke’s Jesus, the waters could not shake it, because it had been well built. The man who built the second house with no foundation returned after the flood to find nothing left.

In both gospels, the question at the end of Jesus’ sermon is said to be a question of ethics. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” he asks the crowd in Luke. In Matthew, he says to the disciples alone, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” The words to be acted upon are the hard words of Jesus’ sermon: do not be angry or look with lust...resist the evildoer...offer the other cheek...love the enemy and pray for those who persecute you. Followed mostly in the breach, they are commands that thrust us upon the grace of God.

But in the context of these two gospels, written to the nascent communities of faith called out by news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, Jesus’ question also must be heard as a question of ecclesiology, a question concerning how we are to become a community of disciples that will dig deep enough and build well enough that a people may be strengthened for the living of these days, as the rains come, the floods rise and the winds blow? Like the church of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, this church has two distinct options before her.

As regards our choice to be a community built on the foundation of listening but not hearing or acting, type the word “novelty” in a word document, click on it and then scroll down to “look up” and you will read on the right hand side of your computer screen that it means “*something new, original and*

*different that is interesting or exciting, though often for only a short time.*” In the last decade, congregations have bet the future on novelty as the key to success and growth. The hour of worship that entertains, the minister chosen for his (usually his) “good sense of humor,” the choir majoring in happy music, the leadership that side-steps substance for an appeal to numbers. Novelty is tempting when coffers are low, pews emptying out, heads growing gray, and a recession threatening to double dip. It works, but often only for a short time.

I confess that I take no little pleasure in hearing that mega-church preachers are watching their numbers fade. The praise bands, the Starbucks coffee in the narthex, preaching lite and a feel good message were able to interest and excite an audience of spectators, it seems, but only for a short time. According to Jack Haberer, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, preachers like Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church have diagnosed the problem, rewritten their preaching script, and are attempting to build a community of disciples, these days, instead of entertain a gathering of spiritual dabblers.

Likewise, David Brooks cites the work of David Platt, a preacher who earned two master’s degrees and a doctorate from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and then was called, at age 26, to a 4,300 member congregation in suburban Birmingham, Alabama. He soon grew uneasy with the supersizing of the church and has written about the experience in a book entitled, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*. Among other things, he notes that churches have become like corporations, “competing for market share by offering social centers, child-care programs, first-class entertainment and comfortable, consumer Christianity.” He goes on to note that “Jesus made it hard on his followers. He created a minichurch, not a mega one....When we gather in our church building to sing and lift up our hands in worship,” Platt warns, “we may not actually be worshipping the Jesus of the Bible. Instead, we may be worshipping ourselves.”

Novelty is one choice on which to build a church. It may keep a congregation amused, distracted, titillated or diverted from matters of consequence--often only for a short time. I think of the philosophers Paul encountered on the Areopagus in Athens who “spent their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” The better translation of the Greek would be “novel.” Or I think of the congregation in Corinth, already divided in their loyalty between the allure of charismatic cultural gurus recast as Christian preachers and those proclaiming the harder words of Jesus. Paul put the matter starkly:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

The other choice, the choice of digging deep to hear Jesus’ words and then daring to act on them in the face of the rains, the flood,, the winds, builds on the foundation of God’s mercies that never come to an end, the mercies that are not novel but new every morning. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., an unknown poet lamented the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God’s people to Babylon. “I have forgotten what happiness is,” he writes, “so I say, ‘Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.’” The words could be the words of so many in this nation, not only those who are without work or who have faced home foreclosure, but also those who lament the present divisions and hatred and fears that mark our common life and even life within the larger church. They are also words uttered by those who remember organized religion’s better days. Yet at the nadir of the life of God’s people, the poet goes on to write:

*But this I call to mind, and therefore have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;  
God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

*“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”*

Likewise, even in his darkest moments, Calvin never doubted the power of the gospel to call out of chaos the church of Jesus Christ. “Therefore,” he wrote of the invisible church, “though the melancholy desolation which surrounds us seems to proclaim there is nothing left of the church, let us remember that the death of Christ is fruitful, and that God wonderfully preserves his Church as it were in hiding-places.”

I pray that the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill may more and more become one of those hiding-places, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone. In the bleak economy of the year behind us and before us, you could say that our life together portends nothing new. We will gather to sing the great hymns that have strengthened generation after generation. We will open the book that has been a light in the darkness, the anchor in the storm for those who have gone before us. We will say our prayers. We will dig deep and ask, in classroom and pulpit, after the meaning of God’s word to us today. We will tend our sick, comfort those who grieve, teach our children the old, old story, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, require justice, pray for peace.

Yet it also must be said that every morning of our life together is made new by the gift of God’s steadfast love and mercy in Jesus Christ. This should never cease to astonish us and lead us to ask how we are being faithful to the new thing God is doing in Him. Does our worship offer to God our most excellent praise and turn our lives Godward? Is our engagement with Scripture at a depth that will anchor our lives in God’s tender mercies that never come to an end? Will the lives of our children be shaped by this man who lived for others? How might our common life better show forth the love and justice of Jesus Christ? Does our hearing of God’s address send us into the world with tangible hope for the least of these?

“We have listened to the Sermon on the Mount and perhaps have understood it,” began Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the last sermon of a series now ending with the parable of the two builders. “But who has heard it aright?” Neither the ministers of the German Evangelical Church—who had chosen to conflate their loyalty to National Socialism and the German culture with their obedience to Jesus Christ and so were enjoying the benefits of popular sentiment before the rains and floods and winds left nothing in their wake; nor [I suspect Bonhoeffer would say] the small band of others who chose to build the Confessing Church—a minichurch—on the foundation of loyalty to Jesus Christ alone, neither had heard Jesus truly. “Jesus gives the answer in the end,” says Bonhoeffer.

He does not allow his hearers to go away and make of his sayings what they will, picking and choosing from them whatever they find helpful and testing them to see if they work. He does not give them free rein to misuse his word with their mercenary hands, but gives it to them on condition that it retains exclusive power over them. Humanly speaking, we could interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience....doing and obeying....He really means us to get on with it.

So let us, for Christ’s sake, get on with it, with building the church as those who choose to dig deep and dare excellence and act on the word we have heard in him who is our sure foundation. Amid the shallow, the novel and the nightly news, call this to mind and have hope: *He* is making all things new every morning, including the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Welcome home!