

“Building on Christ Alone”
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48
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1 Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23

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.

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Matthew 5:38–48

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Last week I promised that I wouldn't be talking about the church – our church – all the way through April, when I complete my work as your pastor. And I mean it, truly. But since it is our habit in Lake Forest to paper over our troubles and pretend like everything is fine, fine, fine – I want to take one more opportunity for us to look at what is required of us now. Just for today, I want to pick up where I left off last week – not to rehearse the recent drama – but to look forward. Today, I want to discern with you the holy work that lies ahead.

For those of you who may be new here, or who have been out of the loop, suffice it to say that our congregation has had a really, really rugged last few months. The short story is that, as your pastor, I feel responsible for a cloud of vulnerability that enveloped us – a vulnerability that was experienced in very different ways by different segments of our church. Preschool parents, Choir members, Elders, Rummage sorters, Personnel committee members, and plain old people-in-the-pews have all faced this in their own way. So depending on where you “land,” you may be feeling angry, confused, sad, weary, vindicated, left out, all of the above, or perhaps none of the above.

The question is, what do we *do* in times like this? Whether you've been in the vortex of *this* crisis, here at our church, I am sure you have been, at some point in your life, caught in the maelstrom of uncertainty and fear, conflict and vulnerability. So the question for *all* of us, in this situation or in others, is this: what do we do with our feelings, our differing loyalties and convictions? Where does our faith lead us? And what difference does our response make anyway?

Let's start with the question about our feelings. The first thing I want to affirm is that whenever we're in a situation of vulnerability or conflict, uncertainty or division, we *will* have different feelings, different loyalties, different convictions. That's normal. So normal, in fact, that this multivalent, conflicting response to our struggles goes back to the time of the earliest Christians. The first lesson we heard this morning, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, confirms that fact: vulnerability and divisions are *going to be* part of the Christian life. Back in Paul's time – less than 20 years after Jesus' cross and resurrection – back in Paul's time, his congregation was divided over

whether which leader had the right answer – Paul, or Peter (Cephas), or Apollos. It’s a lot like people in our church today who are asking whether the Preschool is right, or Session, or our staff, or the Presbytery, or none-of-the-above.

Paul notes that our go-to solution is to turn to the experts for ultimate answers. In his day, that included the religious leaders like Peter and Apollos; it included scholars (including Paul himself, by the way), and it also included rival politicians and philosophers. It’s akin to today’s competing arguments in our country: you’ve got Ayn Rand-Objectivism in which individual happiness and self-interest are the ultimate goalⁱ ... or you’ve got “America First” in which nationalist identity and security trump other priorities ... or you’ve got “Globalism,” which Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg advocated earlier this week in a manifesto against isolationism.ⁱⁱ There are a thousand different, competing philosophies about how we should solve our problems. And don’t get me wrong –thoughtfulness matters, and we must take the time to *think* – to think carefully about who we are and how we’re called to be our best selves.

But in the end, this is Paul’s bottom line: there *is* no perfect answer. And if we imagine we are going to find one right solution by finding the right leader, we are, in Paul’s words, fools. *No human leader can save us.* Instead, Paul says, we should focus on where our salvation really lies: in our shared identity in Christ. Listen again to Paul’s words:

“So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.”

So that’s the first thing I want to affirm: precisely when we’re feeling vulnerable and divided, we need to remember where our true security, our ultimate identity lies. We don’t belong to different factions. Wherever we stand on different issues, every one of us here belongs to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. Precisely when we’re shaken or confused, our first order of business is to remember to whom we belong – we belong to Christ.

Which leads us to a second necessary question: if we say that we're Christian – if we say we belong to Christ – then what? Where does our faith lead us? Especially in such unsettled times, how does our faith inform us *differently* than other constructs, other philosophies, other rules of the road? If, in Paul's words, "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God," then what does the wisdom of God look like?

For this, let's turn to Jesus' own instruction. In the verses we heard from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins by saying, "You have heard it said," quotes Scripture, and then wrestles with it: "But I say to you" In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, which this passage is part of, Jesus has done this over and over and over again. Last week we heard Jesus say, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder,' but I say to you, 'Whoever is angry with a brother or sister is liable to judgment.'" In the verses that follow, he goes on to say avoiding adultery isn't enough; we must not lust ... and not breaking an oath isn't enough; we must not swear oaths at all. Now, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you ... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well And you have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he ... sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ... Be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Or better translated, "be mature – grow up! – just as your heavenly Father is mature."

You belong to Christ. You are children of your Father in heaven. You are to grow up, to become mature. And in the way of Christ, true maturity, true wisdom, aspires to be more than fair. True wisdom aspires to be gracious, just as God is gracious. True wisdom leads us to be humble, just as Christ humbled himself on the cross for us.

So ... let me recap. Our feelings are real and complicated and uncomfortable, and that's normal. Trying to figure out *what* we believe at times like this, in our church and in our country, is difficult and important work. But – here's the thing - retreating to our camp of like-minded friends

isn't going to solve anything. Instead, we're called to remember that our *primary* identity is "belonging to Christ." And belonging to Christ means loving others – even our enemies – as Christ has loved us.

Which leads us to our last question for this morning: why does it matter so much what we do here? Why does it matter so much how we respond to our crisis in the church – especially when so many crucial problems are facing our country and our world? Here's why it matters: because *what we do here lays the groundwork for what God is doing in the world*. Let me say it again. *What we do here lays the groundwork for what God is doing in the world*. If we can't try to get it right here, *why bother?* Honestly, why bother even trying?

I know for many of you, it would be easy to give up on church right now. I know it would be tempting just to walk away. This isn't what you signed up for, I'm sure. But with all my heart, I'm feeling so intensely the urgent love that Paul felt for his people:

By God's grace ... I helped lay a foundation, and [now] someone else will build on it. ... But [the only] foundation is Jesus Christ. ...

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... And God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

You ARE that Temple.

Let me be clear: as much as my ministry here has been precious to me; as much as I have tried to do my best, and failed countless times; as much as I have loved you; as much as I worked at strengthening your foundation in Jesus Christ; in the end, it is not *my* ministry that matters. It is *you* that matters: for *you* are God's temple. *You* – your relationships, your witness, the way you treat each other, the way you live in the world – *you* are God's temple. And *you* are holy. Not the building. Not the pastors. Not the music. Not the finances. *You* – collectively – are holy. And that foundation, built not by us, but by Christ – that foundation will never go away.

It may not feel like that right now. At times like this, the foundation may feel like it's shaking ... for some of you, the foundation of our church; for some of you, the foundation of your personal life, your work or health, your marriage or family; and for some of you, I know that even the foundation of

our country feels shaky right now. I certainly felt the fear and uncertainty in my own life these last few months, as I felt my pastoral identity deeply rattled. But this is what I also know: for me, this shaking has only served to strengthen the foundation, settling me even more deeply into the power of Christ alone, leading me to trust – ultimately trust - the security of God’s everlasting arms.

And we – we all have been here before. Shaken. Uncertain. Maybe even scared. I’m sure each of you has your own story, of loss or fear or grief or shame, of your security being shaken so hard, everything you thought you knew was sure became unhinged. But if you’ve been there before, you also know this: what matters, in the end, was how we rebuild afterward.

Let me close with a story about the hymn we are about to sing: “We would be building, temples still undone,” the first lines read. The words may be unfamiliar, but you’ll recognize the tune. I first came across this hymn nearly 16 years ago now – planning worship for the Sunday after 9/11. All my clergy friends were scrambling to figure out what on earth to do in worship, and we felt totally inadequate ... including my friend Jon Walton, had just started to serve First Church in New York, just blocks from the World Trade Center.

Do you remember how you felt then, in the wake of that attack? For many of us in America, it felt like the fall of the Towers was just the beginning, that the whole world was crashing down. In the days and weeks that followed, everything felt insecure. We didn’t know who might attack us again, or when. We didn’t know who to trust, within or without. We didn’t know how to be faithful Christians in a world that included people who hated us so utterly. There were myriad competing narratives, politics and philosophies about what was needed. What I remember deeply, though, was the way we knew we had to come together to rebuild our shaken nation. No one could do it on their own.

That Sunday, as my congregation came to worship, and to face the work we had ahead, this hymn that we sang together compelled us and encouraged us as no mere words ever could. Now it’s our turn to sing it. And as we do, I ask you this: see if you can’t muster courage now – to rebuild what has been deeply shaken. Is this not the holy work ahead of us?

We would be building; temples still undone
O'er crumbling walls their crosses scarcely lift,
Waiting till love can raise the broken stone,
And hearts creative bridge the human rift.
We would be building; Master, let thy plan
Reveal the life that God would give to man.
Teach us to build; upon the solid rock
We set the dream that hardens into deed,
Ribbed with the steel that time and change doth mock,
The unfailing purpose of our noblest creed.
Teach us to build; O Master, lend us sight
To see the towers gleaming in the light.

O keep us building, Master; may our hands
Ne'er falter when the dream is in our hearts,
When to our ears there come divine commands
And all the pride of sinful will departs.
We build with thee, O grant enduring worth
Until the heavenly kingdom comes on earth.

ⁱ “Man—every man—is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life.”

ⁱⁱ “Mark Zuckerberg Warns Against Threats to Globalism and Says Facebook Is Here to Help,” Reuters, Feb 17, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/02/16/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-globalism/>