

“Your Practice of Faith”

Matthew 7:24-27

August 23, 2020

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It's great to look out on all your smiling, masked faces this morning, as two churches worship together as one community of faith. Thank you, Tom, for inviting us! First Pres. is thrilled to be with you in person at the Gazebo in Lake Bluff and via live-streaming from home.

I

When Tom suggested we preach together on the Conclusion to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I jumped at the chance, because in these exceptional times of social, economic and political uncertainty, when this pandemic has changed so much that we've taken for granted, we need more than ever something solid to stand on to weather the storm. As Jesus spoke on that hilltop in Galilee long ago to those who would listen, we too are thirsting for something's that right amid all the sound and the fury of daily news cycles that fill our virtual world with more heat than light. What are we to do? Long, long ago, during another time of great uncertainty when God's people were in exile in Babylon, the Prophet said, "Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that

seek the Lord. Look to the Rock from which you were hewn..." (Isa. 51:1). Jesus final words of his Sermon admonish us to do the same.

II

So what's going on here? Jesus has just given the greatest sermon that ever was or will be delivered, and the people were astounded by his authority. Specifically, he addressed the virtue of humility, the question of who really is blessed, the inclusion and extent of loving our neighbor, and the grand endeavor of making the Ten Commandments a matter of heart.

And now, at the very end of his Sermon and very unlike its beginning, Jesus leaves us with this warning:

"So then—everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, and it did not fall..."

Who is he speaking to? to all who will listen—and particularly to us. We're the very people, like those others who came long ago to hear him, who have come to hear his words today. Why? Because we believe what he's teaching us about the Kingdom of God is true. We are "hearing" Jesus—which is where our faith in him begins. We believe what he is saying matters, and we believe him to be trustworthy. This is vitally important—because the story which follows is not about two people, one of whom has faith and one doesn't, or one of whom is good and the other not so good, or one of whom is a Christian and the other

isn't. Oh no. Jesus is speaking to all those who are listening, and this means you.

But not all of us are ready to put into practice what we are hearing, are we? And that is the point of this parable. How do we grow from hearers into doers?

III

I want you to think about what “practice” means for a moment. We say, “Go practice the piano!” (or my mother did), or “Get up or you’re going to miss swim practice!” or “You need to practice your presentation for tomorrow!” Practice means to perform or work at something repeatedly in order to become proficient. But we also use ‘practice’ as a noun, and when we do that, we mean doing something as a career, a profession, a calling. We speak of the practice of medicine, the practice of ministry, and the practice of law. What if we were to think about Christianity the same way? That Jesus is calling us to become his Practitioners?

What we have here is a story about two people—one who is wise and the other foolish. Both are listening to Jesus. Both, if you will, are believers. And both are building their houses, which is to say, the structures, values and relationships that define their living. Both houses may be equally large, and equally well-appointed. But that’s not the point of the story. What matters is the foundation beneath these two houses: one of which is rock, and the other made of sand. The rock that Jesus means here is the content of his teaching—the substance of what he is calling us to be and do.

Everyone builds their house on something. We build on what we trust—or want to trust, like our physical strength or personal attractiveness; our possessions and portfolios; our families and friendships; our gifts and abilities. The problem is that all of these things change and can even fail when the storms of life hit us like the Derecho that came out of nowhere and hit Iowa last week. There are far worse storms than that...storms of the spirit, that can drive us to our knees. What happens when the rain falls and the floods come and the winds howl around the places of our hearts?

Both houses belonged to people who listened to Jesus. They probably both went to church and even attended Bible Study! But only one of them is putting into practice what is being learned. And that makes all the difference...

When I've taught on the contents of Matthew 5-7, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, (which is something First Pres. is going to do for seven Sundays starting next month), people respond by saying, "This isn't realistic—how can I not get angry?" or "This is naïve. Turn the other cheek? The world doesn't work that way. When somebody hits you, you need to hit them back harder." Most often, I hear, "This is just too hard for me to do. Jesus wants me to love my enemies? I don't think I'm really prepared to do that..."

For my part, that would describe me most of the time. In my heart, I believe—but my actions reveal something different. That's where the problem lies. T.S. Eliot said in his poem "The Hollow Men,"

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the shadow.

For Thine is the Kingdom.

Is that where you find yourself? Standing in the shadows between hearing and doing? What would it look like to walk into the light?

Conclusion

So here's what I'd like to say to you this morning:

Yes—the Sermon on the Mount seems like an impossible mountain to conquer. But maybe that's the wrong way to think about it. After all, if this stuff were easy—what would be the good in that? If we could all say, “Love your enemies?” Check. “Don't be judgmental?” Check. “Turn the other cheek?” Check. “Give him the shirt off your back?” Check. Wouldn't that just contribute to our spiritual pride? Jesus started his sermon by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” And that's exactly how we should take the sermon's end as well.

This Sermon isn't a test we're meant to get an “A” on. It's a Roadmap for a journey. Or a blueprint for a house. We don't need to master this teaching. Someone already has. All we're called to do is practice it: one day, one hour—even one minute at a time. If we're willing to try that, then something quite beautiful begins to happen.

The Master himself draws near, discerning our acts and our intentions. And when the storm hits (and hit it will), we discover that the solidity of his teaching cannot be separated from Jesus himself. Christ is with us. We remain standing because we stand in him. That old hymn got it right: "On Christ the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand." Our house has become Christ's home.

They say that "Practice makes perfect." This is widely known! So let's get busy. While the light is shining we've got practicing to do! And when night falls, and the Perfect comes like the Evening Star, calling us each by name, then may the works of our hands, and the intentions of our hearts give God glory and praise!

Almighty God, give us grace to be not only hearers, but doers of thy holy word, not only to admire, but to obey thy teaching, not only to profess, but to practice thy religion, not only to love, but to live thy gospel. So grant that what we learn of thy glory we may receive into our hearts, and show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

—William Barclay