

WHEN THE STORM HITS (*and it will!*) . . .

(09/23/18)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 7:1-5, 12-13, 24-29

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.” (Mt. 7:24-25)

The past two weeks we have all been following the path of Hurricane Florence. This tropical storm with its accompanying flooding has had a devastating effect on residents of North and South Carolina. It was not as devastating as Hurricane Maria, which brought Puerto Rico to its knees and claimed over 3,000 lives last year; Puerto Rico is still working to restore power and rebuild.

I have also been following the path of Typhoon Mangkhut that swept through the Philippine islands around the same time that Hurricane Florence hit the Carolina coast. Meteorologists have called Mangkhut the most powerful storm in the world this year. It has already claimed over 100 lives with the total predicted to rise when bodies are recovered from the landslides that it has caused. The attendant floods have totally destroyed the crops in the region, striking a blow to a fragile economy and threatening to cause a severe food shortage. The physical and psychological impact of these storms is difficult to grasp, especially when we remember that these numbers signify people: living human beings, someone’s mother or father, son or daughter, husband, wife, or child.

We don’t always feel the impact of natural disasters when they happen in other parts of the world. Our locus of concern and hence our compassion is often far too limited and parochial. An example of this was our relative lack of concern for the devastation that was inflicted upon the people of Puerto Rico by Hurricane Maria. We were not as concerned about the people who died in the wake of this natural disaster because they were not Americans. Wait a minute! They actually are Americans! Well, they’re not citizens. Wait a minute! They actually are American citizens! I guess our relative indifference to their plight was because they don’t look like the vast majority of our citizens and our leaders in Washington; they also speak another language. I think you get my point.

I confess I have a special connection and concern in relation to Typhoon Mangkhut. Several years ago, I began receiving emails from the pastor of a small church

in a remote area somewhere in the Philippines. The pastor's name is Bervs Villadares. He is in his early forties, married, with three children. He and his wife minister to a small congregation. I don't think they have much money because he has to go into a nearby town to an internet café in order to correspond with me.

I took an immediate liking to this young man from the first time we corresponded several years ago. To be honest, it may have something to do with the fact that he found our church web site online and he not only reads, he actually *likes* my sermons! He, the pastor of an evangelical Protestant church in a very different culture, has asked me to serve as his mentor. When a question of faith or spirituality arises in the life of his little community, e.g., concerning the role of women in the church, the importance of being able to speak in tongues, or the meaning of a particular verse in the Bible, he asks me for guidance. I am ashamed to say that he also has been more than patient with how slow I have been in responding to his emails.

At our last meeting I asked the Diaconate if we could respond affirmatively to Reverend Bervs' expressed desire that our two churches become prayer partners. I hope that in the future we can also make them a recipient of our mission outreach. Reverend Bervs always asks me to tell him what *our* needs are as a church and what *my* needs are as a person and as the pastor of this church, *so his people can pray for us!* He strikes me as a loving pastor to his parishioners; he is excited about beginning a Bible school for their children; he believes in the power of prayer; and his people reach out to each other and the other people in their community, e.g., by helping rebuild homes following the natural disasters that hit their area so often.

I would like us to build a relationship with this little church on the other side of the world. I think we have a lot to offer to them, and they have a lot to offer us. Did I mention that Reverend Bervs walks or drives to the nearest city, goes to an internet café where he pays money to access our web site, and that he not only reads, he actually likes my sermons? He shares my sermons and my reflections with his people! I think you may be starting to see why I like this guy!

This past week, as I thought about Hurricane Florence and Typhoon Mangkhut, I was reminded of a Peanuts cartoon. In it, Charlie Brown is pictured on a beach building a beautiful sand castle.

When the castle is finally completed, Charlie stands back to admire his handiwork. It is certainly an impressive castle with moats, turrets, the works! In the next frame of the strip a single raindrop falls to the ground. Then several raindrops fall. Then it is raining heavily. Soon the rain is coming down in torrents. The beautiful sand castle begins to dissolve into a nondescript pile of sand.

In the last frame of the cartoon, Charlie Brown is standing in the torrential downpour looking pensively at his rapidly disintegrating castle. He says, quite philosophically, “I think there’s a lesson in this.”

The scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew follows Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon Jesus tells us what it is like to be blessed, to be fulfilled, to be fully human, to dwell in the kingdom of God. He ends his lesson on a down-to-earth, realistic note. He reminds us that the tempest will come, that the rain will fall, that everything we have built during the sunny days will be assaulted by the storms of life. He ends his sermon with a warning of impending crisis.

Jesus calls us to look at what we have built and what we are building in our life, in the limited amount of time that is allotted to us. He especially calls us to look at the foundation, the bedrock of our life—that on which we build.

Charlie Brown is correct: there *is* a lesson in what happened to his sand castle. It makes a difference what we use to build our house. The story of The Three Little Pigs made this abundantly clear long before we were mature enough to grasp its profound teaching. It makes a difference whether we build our house of straw, sticks, or bricks. It may not make a noticeable difference when life is going well. However, there will come a time when the structures we have built will be tested. Then it will make a difference.

A good foundation is essential to the successful construction of a house. It is important that the foundation be strong enough to support the weight of the house. The foundation needs to be set into a solid base so that it will not sink or crack. Several years ago, when Darlene, Kristen, and I were in Italy, we visited the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Because the tower was originally constructed on marshy land, the foundation could not hold the weight of the edifice. Some of the greatest architects and engineers of the world have been working for centuries to save this beautiful building from collapse.

It is equally important that the house be built “square,” with its lines and corners exactly according to plan. A slightly skewed foundation may not seem like a big deal until it is time to build the roof. Then the effect of the misaligned angles becomes magnified and things don’t fit together. If the floors aren’t level, or if the walls lean inward at an odd angle, or if the roofline sags a little at one end, the root of the problem may actually lie with the foundation. Those who admire the finished house may not appreciate the value of a good foundation, but they would certainly recognize the problems created by a bad one.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the two houses to teach us something about our life. What is true of our houses is equally true of us. As in the fairy tale of The Three Little Pigs, it makes a difference what we use to construct our “house.” Do we construct our psychological and spiritual house with the cheapest of materials, putting as little time and effort into its construction as possible, or do we have the discipline to engage in thoughtful, guided reflection? As those who work with computers are fond of telling us, “Garbage in--Garbage out.”

Jesus calls attention to the foundation of our “house.” He tells us that the foundation of our house is our spiritual life, our relationship with God through Christ. This is the foundation upon which everything else in our life should be built, around which everything else should emerge or evolve. It is from this foundation that our thoughts, feelings, and actions arise. This is the grounding for all our relationships. If the foundation is solid, stable, and healthy, our life will be solid, stable, and healthy. If the foundation is cracked, flawed, or built of inadequate materials, the effect of it will become manifest throughout the building, and it will show itself in various ways both intra-psychically and interpersonally in our lives.

Jesus tells us that we have two choices. We can build our psychological, spiritual, and relational house on rock. We can also build it on sand. He says,

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against the house, and it fell--and great was its fall! (Matthew 7:24-27)

Some of us did not receive much of a religious background when we were children. With some of us, what we received was inadequate or even twisted and unhealthy. It doesn't matter. We can build or rebuild that foundation as adults. We are building that foundation here this morning.

Every time we attend worship; every time we receive the sacraments; every time we read the Bible; every time we pray; every time we talk to Jesus, we are building the foundation according to God's specifications. Every time we sing a hymn and think about the words; every time we open our hearts and our hands to those in need, we are laying another stone or brick in place. This becomes the foundation for our life.

When life goes smoothly, as it does from time to time, the significance of a well-constructed or ill-constructed foundation may not be readily apparent. However, when the storms of life hit, the flaws of the foundation will be exposed.

Remember--Jesus ended his sermon with a warning. He did not say "if" the storms of life hit, but "when." When the storm hits (and it will!), the foundation upon which our life is grounded will be tested. If we have built our house on the rock, it will not only stand, it will prosper. If we have built our house on sand, it will fall, and great will be its fall.

Is there anyone here this morning who has not been buffeted by the storms of life? Is there anyone here who has not been touched by serious illness, who does not suffer from some affliction or live in chronic pain? Is there anyone here who has not struggled with anxiety or depression? Is there anyone here who has not had his/her plans turned upside down by the shifting winds or tides? Is there anyone here who has not lost a loved one, who has not struggled with the great emptiness, the emptiness that cannot be filled? Is there anyone here who has not been deeply hurt by loved ones, by husband or wife, by son or daughter?

If there is anyone here who has not yet been buffeted by the storms of life, I congratulate you! You are either very young or you have been very lucky. I don't want to sound like a "doom and gloom" preacher, but I would at least caution you. With most of us, it is not a matter of *if* the storms of life hit but *when*. When the storms of life hit (*and they will!*), the foundation on which we have built will not only be disclosed; it will

be tested. Then we will know whether we have been building on rock or on shifting sands.

Charlie Brown realized that “into each life some rain must fall.” If we have built our life on the rock that is Christ, he who, in the words of our opening hymn is the “sure foundation,” the “cornerstone,” we will not only survive the storms of life, we will be strengthened and deepened by them.

Let us continue to build this foundation as we deepen our relationship with the risen Lord who is present to us in worship, in fellowship, and in the mission life of this little church.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
September 23, 2018*