

BUILD ON THE ROCK

(08/07/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 3:4b-14
Luke 6:43-49

“I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.” (Luke 6:47-48)

*. *. *. *

The rock is a powerful symbol in Christianity. In our opening hymn this morning, Christ is described as the rock, the sure foundation, and the cornerstone. Rocks carry with them the intimation of immortality. This explains why we use rocks as tombstones in our cemeteries, and why rocks and stone walls are often used to establish and maintain boundaries.

Rocks can be used as places of refuge. They can be used to hide from other human beings, as when David’s men hid from the forces of Saul in the Rocks of the Wildgoats (1 Samuel 24:2). They can be used to hide from God. Moses used a cleft in a rock to protect himself from seeing God’s face, for to do so would have cost Moses his life. Isaiah 2:19 predicts that on the Day of Judgment,

*. . . men shall enter the caves of the rocks,
and the holes of the ground,
from before the terror of the Lord,
and from the glory of his majesty,
when he rises to terrify the earth.*

When the psalms speak metaphorically of God as a rock, they witness to the constancy, strength, and power of God’s protection. Psalm 18 says,

*I love thee, O Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge.*

Jesus uses the metaphor of rock in several ways. As we heard last week, in the Parable of the Sower and the Seed, he speaks of rocky ground as ground that hinders growth, ground that is not receptive to the Word. A rock can also keep us entombed in an old, unfulfilling way of life, as in the stone that covered Jesus’ tomb, the stone that the angel rolled away. In the myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus is condemned to push a gigantic rock up a hill, only to have it roll back to the bottom before he can reach his goal. Here, the rock or stone appears as a burden we are condemned to carry, a burden we cannot shed. However, in our scripture lesson this morning Jesus tells us that there is a rock that can serve as the foundation of our lives, a rock upon which we can build.

The past few weeks I have been rereading an interesting book by Emma Jung, Carl's wife and one of the outstanding psychoanalysts in that first generation of analytical or archetypal psychologists. Emma was particularly interested in the legends of the Holy Grail, the symbol of the feminine dimension of the Divine that had become lost to the patriarchal church and the patriarchal European culture. She died before she finished her book, so Marie Louise von Franz finished it and published it under their names. The book is entitled *The Grail Legend*.

The Holy Grail, as you know, was the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper. It was also the container that received his blood following the piercing of his side with a lance by Longinus during Jesus' crucifixion. Emma Jung, in her book, noted that in the 12th century, in addition to being a cup, the Grail was visualized as a rock, a sacred stone. It is what the alchemists called the *lapis philosophorum*, the philosopher's stone, both the agent and the goal of the process of inner transformation. The secret of the Grail, which was supposedly brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea and was hidden away, could cure the wound of the Fisher King, the ruler of the realm. This reminds us of Jesus' teaching about the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price, both metaphors for the soul, for the kingdom of God that we seek, and around which Jesus tells us to build our lives.

The legend of Perceval and the Holy Grail addressed a spiritual malaise that had infected the Fisher King's realm. We have such a malaise in our time, as well. Because of the political polarization that has complicated our response to the coronavirus, e.g., with regard to restrictions and the vaccines; the explosion of disinformation and unfounded conspiracy theories; the rise of white heterosexual patriarchal supremacy; the rise of authoritarianism and totalitarianism around the world; the loss of confidence in our institutions, including the Supreme Court and the church; the destruction of the environment; and our economic struggles with income inequality; our nation is passing through a difficult time. The world is passing through a difficult time.

This is nothing new. We have passed through difficult times in the past and we will continue to do so in the future. Because of our deep interconnectedness, when our nation passes through a difficult time, sooner or later individuals will find themselves passing through difficult times—and *vice versa*.

During these crises, the actual problems, which are real, are exacerbated by a shock wave that is felt through the entire system. If we can't trust our President and our congressional leaders, whom can we trust? If we can't trust the police and our judicial system, whom can we trust? If we can't trust our priest, our minister, and the institutional church, whom can we trust? In Jungian terms, we find that our innocence is shattered. We have expelled ourselves from the Garden of Eden. We discover that there is a shadow side not only to individuals, but also to our cherished institutions.

The Chinese word for crisis is composed of two ideograms. One of these is the symbol for danger. The other is the symbol for opportunity. This suggests that in every crisis, whether it takes place on the personal or national level, in addition to the possibility of danger there is also the opportunity for growth.

Personal or national crises challenge both our resources and our worldview. The crisis is like a storm that discloses the foundation on which we have built our identity, our culture, our nation, our civilization. If we have built our house on rock, we will survive. If we have built on sand, we will perish.

Let us go back to our scripture reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians. We don't know the state of Paul's finances, whether he was prosperous. He may not have been wealthy, but he was probably not poor. He was a tentmaker, a skilled tradesman. In this letter Paul tells his people, "I have suffered the loss of all things."

"I have suffered the loss of all things." From this passage, we can assume that there was a time in his life, probably before his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, when Paul had "things," when he had possessions. He might have even set his sights--and his heart--on amassing things. As we know, this approach to life can consume us. The consumer inevitably becomes the consumed. I think this is becoming clear to us as we learn more and more about the ubiquitous internet and the impact of social media on the way young people see and feel about themselves.

Paul tells us that, from his own experience, "things" can't get us through the existential crises of our lives. No matter how many billions of dollars you have, you are going to die. No matter how successful you have become in your profession, you cannot escape that little voice within that asks you the existential question of the meaning of life, the meaning of *your* life. In Tolstoy's novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan, who has done everything "right," who has identified with the collective consciousness, the social mores of early 20th century Russia, comes down with an unexplained illness. As he approaches death, Ivan hears a little voice within him, the voice of his soul. It simply says to him, "You have done it all wrong." You have done it all wrong! How would you like to hear this voice when you are on your deathbed?

If we are looking for a foundation on which to build, we would be wise not to choose things. We would also be wise not to choose money. As we know from our present financial crisis, e.g., our investments in cryptocurrency, money and possessions are like shifting or sinking sand. This is especially true because of the bipolar nature of most industrial-technological economies. A manic period in the stock market or in the valuation of property, which we love, is inevitably followed by a depression, which we hate. That's not an injustice; that's just the way it is.

Paul tells us that we are more than our material possessions. He tells us that we can live without many of our material possessions. He says, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." I regard the "things" of my life as rubbish. The word "rubbish" (*skubala*) is a strong word in Greek. It may have even been an expletive in Paul's day, much as we use it when we say "Rubbish!" or a stronger word than "rubbish" (which I won't say in church) to imply that what someone is saying is not only false but nonsense.

Things cannot serve as the foundation of our lives. Possessions cannot serve as the foundation of our lives. Money and wealth cannot serve as the foundation of our lives. Popularity and prestige cannot serve as the foundation of our lives. Success cannot serve as the foundation of our lives. These are no more than sinking or shifting sand. They can come and they can go. Only Christ, the rock, is the true foundation for our lives.

Paul goes on to tell his parishioners something else that he has discovered. He tells them that a religion of rules also cannot serve as the true foundation of our lives. Paul was a religious person at an earlier stage in his life. He was a properly circumcised Jew. He was a Pharisee, a strict observer of the law. He says he was “righteous, blameless under the law.” But this didn’t help him in his relationship with God. It didn’t help him discover the Christ who eventually managed to break through, turn Paul’s life around, and become the center of his life.

Many Christians fall into the category that Paul just described in relation to his religion. How often have you heard people say, “My religion is the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule”? They say, “I obey the rules and regulations of my religion. I am a law-abiding citizen. This is all I need. I don’t need the church.”

In response to this characterization, Paul would say that religion is about more than following rules. It is about more than living an upright and moral life, though this is certainly important. Our religion is about building a relationship with God through Christ. Our religion is not about rules and regulations but about *communion*! Paul realized that what he needed was not “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

In this powerful passage, Paul tells us what does *not* work as a foundation for our life, and he tells us what *does* work. He tells us that we need to experience “the power of the resurrection,” that we need to die to the old self if we are to be reborn to the new. He tells us that we need to persevere, that we need to “press on” in our efforts to make our faith an integral part of our life. When we do this, we build our house upon the rock. We can do this because Christ, the cornerstone, the “sure foundation,” has called us unto himself. This is what Paul refers to as “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

When the outer structures, the structures in which we placed our faith, collapse, we can end up with nothing. But we do not have to end up with nothing. We can use this as an opportunity to discover, to uncover a deeper structure, a deeper foundation. We can rediscover the truth of what Jesus meant when, in Matthew 6, he said,

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

We meet in worship this morning to draw strength for the living of our lives, lives that are being lived in difficult times. We gather around this communion table as a community, a

community of faith, to experience once again the presence of our Lord both within us and among us. We meet here to rediscover the rock, the sacred stone that alone can serve as the true foundation of our lives. If we build our lives upon this rock, the storms of life, whether they are internal or external, will not destroy us. If we do not, our little house will be swept away.

I invite you to reflect upon the foundation of your life during the quiet of our communion service. At the close of our worship service, we will join in the powerful affirmation of faith that is articulated in our closing hymn. Written by Edward Mote in 1834, the refrain to this hymn proclaims:

*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
August 7, 2022*