

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

June 1, 2008

Building Program

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 46; Matthew 7:21-29

There is an old adage among Outdoor enthusiasts which says “there is no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes.” In other words, if you are dressed appropriately, you can go outside under any conditions. We could add a similar saying, “there is no such thing as a natural disaster, only bad builders and poor preparedness.”

Quite obviously, both of these sayings stretch the truth, the second perhaps more than the first. Nevertheless, at a time when we seem to be witnessing more earthquakes, mud slides, tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes, it is clear that the amount of human suffering has been magnified by a great number of structures—poorly located or poorly constructed—which never should have been built in the first place. In southwest China, earthquakes are an expected part of life, but the schools were not built to withstand them. Now, anguished parents are asking “why?” Why were their children not protected?

Similar questions were asked in 1999, following a devastating earthquake on the island of Taiwan. I was looking for some information about that earthquake, because the husband of a good friend designed a large apartment building which made it through that disaster with very little damage. Some said it was a miracle, but he said it was good architecture.

I found a newspaper article written at that time describing the numerous high-rise buildings which crumbled on that day. “The 7.6-magnitude quake exposed substandard materials

hidden inside some newer buildings, revealing empty vegetable oil cans, wads of newspapers and plastic foam stuffed inside support columns and walls in place of concrete or brick.

“‘The earthquake exposed many of the problems which had long been concealed under the glossy surfaces of the buildings,’ said Lee Yung-lai, a landscape designer.

“‘The problem we have today is not a natural disaster, but the ugliness of some human beings,’ Hsu Tse-tai, a victim of the quake, said from his wheelchair, his head, arms and legs wrapped in bandages. The 32-year-old doctor was rescued after being trapped for three days in the rubble of his apartment building — which was built by one of eighteen architects and contractors recently arrested for shoddy work.”

As a builder, the difference between doing the right thing and doing the wrong thing is the difference between carefulness and carelessness, between the quick, easy route and the harder, more costly one. It the difference between wisdom and foolishness, standing and falling, life and death.

What a metaphor that process of building provides for the Christian life! Wisdom or foolishness. Building on rock or building on sand. Paying attention to structural integrity or worrying about the façade. Actually doing what Jesus commands or going through the motions. Standing or falling. Living or dying.

Those are strong words, I know, but Jesus does not mince words. He intends to shake his hearers from complacency, and he wants to shake us up, too.

Few of us see our Christian faith as a matter of life and death. We see it, rather, as a lifestyle choice, or one item on a menu of activities that we can opt into or out of according to our schedule.

But that is precisely the kind of self-deception that Jesus wants to warn us about in the closing words of his Sermon on the Mount.

Indeed, the theme of deception figures prominently in several passages that offer important lessons about discipleship. “Beware of false prophets, wolves in sheep’s clothing,” Jesus warns. They are not outsiders fighting against the faithful, trying to lead them astray. They are insiders who are wrong. They are living the wrong way. They are teaching the wrong things.

Then, Jesus turns his aim to the ultimate insiders: ourselves. The warning sounds quite harsh. “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” The problem is this: we do not think we make mistakes. We believe that we are making the right choices, at least most of the time. And we’ve got a big stake in maintaining our “rightness” even to the point of defensiveness if anyone suggests otherwise.

That is precisely what the rejected group in the parable attempts to do. They protest with vigor. “How can we be judged lacking? We went through the right motions! We said the right words. We did some good work.”

“I never knew you,” Jesus responds. They have failed to build a relationship with him. In other words, they have ignored the foundations of faith, a point which he makes more explicit in the parable that follows, comparing the difference between a wise and a foolish builder.

The effect of these two parables creates an urgent call for self-examination. The Apostle Paul writes, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Cor 13:5). What are the foundations of your life? Have you taken shortcuts? Have you ignored things to which you should have been attentive? Have you paid attention to things you should have ignored?

As a pastor I have these stock questions that I always ask a couple in their preparation for marriage. The first question really only applies to younger couples. “Do you want to have children?” Now, I quickly add, “you don’t have to tell me your answer, but you have to share your answer with each other, because if one of you wants three kids and the other wants two, chances are you will find a way to compromise. But, if one of you wants no children and the other does, there’s no way to work it out.”

There are, however, two other questions I ask which apply to couples regardless of their age. “Have you shared completely your financial situation with your future spouse, and your health history?”

I insist on these two things, because the outward appearance can differ considerably from the inner reality. Now, just to keep the mood light, I will often say, “If you are holding a winning lottery ticket, now is the time to tell your partner. Likewise, if you’ve got a huge pile of debt, or an underlying medical problem, you need to tell them, and soon.”

Unfortunately, some couples fail to share this information or demand it of each other even when prompted by their pastor. And this is not usually a mistake made by younger couples, but by older ones who really should know better.

As a young pastor, there was in my church a newlywed couple, both of them past retirement age. They lived in a very nice home on a nice street and appeared to be financially secure. The husband was having some obvious health issues that we could all see. A couple of days before Christmas, however, I was shopping in a department store, and there was the wife. I expected her to be at home, helping him, but she was standing behind the counter. I was embarrassed that she’d caught me choosing Peggy’s Christmas present here at the end of the season. She was much more embarrassed that I had run into her.

“Do you enjoy working here?” I inquired, just to start some conversation.

“Are you kidding?” she said. “I don’t want to be here, but I have no choice. When we got married last year, I thought Ben would take care of me, but he’s sick and cannot. No one can help that, but now I’ve discovered we have no money either. He always acted like he was well-off, but it was only an act.” She was exhausted and heart-broken.

No one can build a marriage based on deception. No one can build a relationship with Jesus that way, either.

So, what keeps us honest?

To name a few, there’s prayer; the reading of Scripture; remembering what Jesus said and did; trying out his teachings in service and witness. But there is one other thing, as well.

In the world of architects and contractors, there are always the building inspectors. We know that the inspectors can fall down in their duties. Over the past week or two, we’ve read in our papers of corrupt inspectors (I cannot believe that anyone who works for the City of Chicago would stoop to taking bribes!). Still, the concept should work for us, too, as we open ourselves to the inspection of a mature brother or sister in the faith. We may call them a spiritual mentor, a prayer partner, a pastor or a friend, but we all need some accountability to each other in order to be accountable to Christ.

Again, the Apostle Paul writes to the church, “If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1-2).

Paul is not talking about finger wagging. He is certainly not talking about gossip or judgmentalism, but having someone nearby to whom we can ask questions and expect honest answers. “Am I living according to my values?”

“Here are some choices I’ve been making. Can you help me make better ones?”

“This is how I spend my time. This is how I spend my money. Do you think I am honoring God in the way I spend myself?”

“Does my outer appearance reflect my inner life?”

Not everyone can be a spiritual advisor, but it is our job to find one, whatever our life situation. And it is our job to be available to one another: to listen and encourage, to love and correct our brothers and sisters in faith.

For sure, that is what Jesus does for us. He teaches us the ways of God; points us to the things which are opposed to God; listens to us in prayer; stands near to us in our need.

May we seek to grow in the challenges of faith rather than shrink from them. We begin that process by placing block upon block on the firm foundation of Jesus and his grace. Because the storms will come. They always do. The winds and the waters will rise, but we have been prepared. And we prepare one another by love.

Amen.