

“Walking – Not Talking – the Walk”

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Psalm 46; Matthew 7:21-29

Sunday, June 1st, 2008

We live in a rather mellow part of the world, at least for the most part. The Pacific Northwest isn't prone to get tornadoes or hurricanes or monsoons. We don't get pounding rainstorms like the Gulf Coast, where 22 inches of rain may fall in a 24 hour period. We don't get the searing heat of the great world deserts, where an average summer day hits 125 degrees, but thank goodness for shade where it is only 105, and it cools off to 90 at night. We aren't wrung out by the oppressive humidity of the jungles and river lowlands of territories on the Equator. Blizzards don't leave us in a white out, with 25 inches of snow in a day driven into eight foot snowdrifts, and the high of the day is barely over 0 degrees.

But when we do get a natural disaster, watch out! We tend to make up for lost time, in a manner of speaking. When we do get high wind warnings, they are quite unpredictable as they tear through our passageways around mountains and islands and through narrow waterways, ripping out bridges like they were paper ribbons, driving ships into distress as if they were mere corks, and tearing the trees of the centuries out by their roots. Then there are our volcanoes and earthquakes, which thankfully only wreak havoc two or three times in a lifetime, since the devastation can be epic in proportion.

So even though we live in a relatively mild environment, we get it right away when we hear what Jesus says about building a house on rock and building a house on sand. We've seen the flooding that can happen on some of our waterfront sandspits or river floodplains. We've seen the sagging lines of buildings that are built on mixed soils that settle at different rates. We know there are some places that a person would be crazy to build a house. Then we also know about the importance of building new structures to withstand certain levels of earthquakes, and we also consider where property might be affected by a massive lahar or mudflow off of Mount Baker, should our pretty mountain decide to shake off its dormancy and erupt. So we get it when Jesus uses the image of building a house on rock versus building a house on sand.

At first glance, one might think that Jesus uses this image to describe the difference between those who believe and those who don't believe. But that's not quite true. Jesus says these images describe people who hear his teachings. The difference is that some people will act on the words of Jesus, and some will not. Back up to the first part of our lesson, and you will hear Jesus say, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven...On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’”

Oh. This is somewhat disturbing. The group being judged is clearly a group of insiders, active followers of Jesus. They are good church folk! Why, they most probably would be commended by the Church for their piety and for their extraordinary accomplishments. They prophesy, they cleanse the evil and demonic presence from people, they do powerful deeds, and it is all in the name of Jesus. Yet these are like people who build their homes on sand instead of rock. We can't just dismiss them easily as the bad guys, because these are religiously active people, maybe even like us. So why does Jesus denounce them? Why does he label their accomplishments as lawless?

It is clear that people who proclaim to the world that they are Christ's people are held to very high standards by God. It is clear, also, that Jesus, the one who brings us the forgiveness and mercy of God, is also the judge. So Jesus brings us both judgment and grace. It is not true that judgment comes only from an angry God and grace comes only from a loving Jesus who bounces children on his lap. Judgment and grace are combined in the overall work of God, and Jesus brings both of these into sharp focus for us. These particular words of judgment are aimed at those who take the grace offered by Jesus too lightly, those who want acceptance without any measure of change in their own life, those who want forgiveness without repentance, those who want grace without discipleship. These words are aimed at those who like to look important in the community of faith, but don't go much farther in allowing God to bring real change to their own lives.

It isn't just a matter of hearing the words of Jesus. It is a matter of **doing** the desire of God. It's like that old saying, "You can't just talk the talk, you gotta walk the walk." Hearing Jesus needs to lead to changed action. No one has actually heard Jesus until the words of Jesus begin to work within the hearer to transform life and direct behavior.

Now I remind you that these words are the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew records this sermon in three chapters, chapters 5, 6, and 7. They wrap up the sermon. Just scan over the sermon, and you'll see what Jesus means about doing these things. He's saying if you follow me, you will do what I just told you to do. Fundamentally, following Jesus does not mean that you leave everybody in awe of your apparently perfect Christian veneer. This sermon begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Then it speaks of Christians being salt and light in the world. Salt and light are subtle yet definite agents of change, as opposed to the peacocks and the lightning bolts of the world. Then Jesus speaks of how attitudes and actions regarding anger, adultery, divorce, pledging vows, and retaliation are to be totally rethought, and must have utmost integrity. Love for enemies is to be the new standard.

Then Jesus turns to religious practice in the sermon. Almsgiving, prayer, fasting, and other practices are not to be done simply to impress others. These things are to be done in order to draw an individual closer to God, not to show everybody how amazing

one's faith is. Priorities concerning material wealth, anxiety, daily focus, and life goals are weighed in the balance, and there are stern words about judgmental attitudes and self-righteousness. Watch out for false prophets, because they are out there, and be steadfast in your lifelong pursuit of God's ways. Oh, yes, and treat others the way you want them to treat you, since this is what all the law and prophets are about.

That's just a quick overview of the Sermon on the Mount. I've left out a lot. But I think you get the idea. Jesus ends the sermon saying, "Do these things. Live them out. Don't just put them on plaques in your kitchen or wish everybody else could do these things. You do them." What separates the wise builder from the foolish builder is the doing of "these words of mine." These words aren't to be played against each other or debated or toyed with. They are to be done. To hear Jesus' words and then do them is to be grasped by them, reshaped by them, to be motivated to obey them, to be set by them on a lifelong journey of discipleship.

Joy Cowley, in her book [Psalms for the Road](#), writes this about the house on the rock:

*You know, I have this feeling
That the wise man who built on the rock,
Had previously built a house on the sand.
He'd learned that sand meant wasted effort
And solid rock was the way to go.
How much wiser that man was
than the one who built on the rock
simply because he didn't know
the sand was there.
Mind you, for people like me,
That wisdom is hard won.
I built several houses on the sand
Before the message got home.
Maybe that's why I value rock so much.*

(Joy Cowley, *Psalms for the Road*, Wellington, New Zealand: Catholic Supplies N.Z. Ltd., 2002, p. 31.)

Any honest attempt to live out the words of Jesus will not feel easy at first, and it may fail repeatedly. Even so, keep at it. The wonderful thing about life with Christ is that one is given the grace to try again.

M. Scott Peck, the well-known writer, was part of a retreat at a small convent once. Sister Lucia, a very old and sweet-faced nun of perhaps 87, was the guest mistress in charge of the retreat house. One night, after everyone else had gone to bed, Scott Peck spilled his pain over his failing marriage to kindly Sister Lucia.

But Sister Lucia beamed with a smile. "Oh, that's just wonderful!" she proclaimed.

Scott Peck wondered if she had a kindly face because she had no brain left behind it. He spoke again, more loudly and slowly this time, like one does with senile people. “No, no, you didn’t understand me. I was telling you I’ve failed at my marriage.”

Again, the bright smile, “Oh, I’m so glad for you,” she answered.

This annoyed him, and he shouted, “No, no, you haven’t heard what I’ve been saying. Probably you’ve got a hearing problem, which you are entitled to at your age. But you haven’t understood anything I’ve said, so let’s just drop the subject.”

“I’ve heard and understood you perfectly, young man,” the wise one responded, looking at him keenly. “You’ve been telling me that you have failed at your marriage, and I’m so glad for you. Do you know how terrible it would be never to fail? Oh, that would be dreadful!”

Scott Peck then writes, “I recollected certain people I’d known who felt they had never failed and thought of just how insufferable they were, and I began to think that maybe she did have some gray matter left behind those intelligent eyes.... It is also, I think, no accident that my marriage with Lily began to considerably improve along about that time. For what happened after I’d concluded I’d failed at my marriage was that, on a certain level, I gave up trying to make it work. And that meant I gave up trying to change Lily.... I suspect it is no accident that since that time, both she and I seem to have done a good deal of changing.” (*Related in A World Waiting to Be Born, M. Scott Peck, M.D., Bantam Books, 1993.*)

Friends, it is never too late to build on the rock of Jesus Christ and his teachings, doing as he asks. The important thing is that you try. God will help you do that – as a matter of fact, God wants to help you try. Amen.