

Building Code

Psalm 46, Genesis 6:11-22, 7:24, 8:14-19, Matthew 7:21-29

Whitefish UMC

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- † The grief on the faces of parents searching for their children in the rubble of schools demolished by the recent Chinese earthquakes is indelibly etched in our memories. That a disproportionate number of those killed in the quakes are children makes their pain even harder to bear.
- † As the aftershocks continue and the death toll mounts, parental and community mourning turns into bitter anger at those who took short cuts and approved the use of shoddy building materials for schools that housed the most vulnerable of the province's citizens.
- † And who can blame those parents and those communities for their outrage? It's a story as old as our ancient ancestors—repeated in fairy tales about pigs and wolves—and heard again in the conclusion of that most famous sermon of all—the Sermon on the Mount.
- † Jesus was a carpenter and he knew a lot about building. One day as he spoke to the people, he put two houses in a parable. For he knew about human nature: He knew how easy it is to hear things, listen to them, agree with them, and then go home and do nothing to act on them.
- † He said: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who builds 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 that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”
- † Jesus told this story about construction and design to show the necessity of doing as well as hearing. It’s not enough to know; it’s not enough to agree. Every word is given that we may use it, put it into action and make it a part of the structure as we build our lives.
- † How timely, then, that we receive each of today’s scripture lessons—the psalm, the Old Testament passages, and the gospel reading—during flood season in the Flathead. Did you notice that each one of them featured some aspect of the power of nature to overwhelm and destroy even our best efforts?
- † I don’t know about you, but I’ve had about enough of cyclones, tropical storms, earthquakes, and tornadoes this spring, thank you very much. Every time you turn on the TV, read the newspaper, or go online, there’s another natural disaster.
- † Did you know that this is the deadliest tornado season ever, and we’re not even half-way through it? If I believed in a God who caused storms, which I don’t, I’d think we’ve done something to really make God angry.
- † One commentator said, “It’s as though the planet is a dog with a bad case of fleas, and she’s trying to shake them off.” Not a pretty image, is it? And we can argue into the wee hours about why there are so many natural disasters now, and why God does care about each person affected by them, but that’s not really the point of Jesus’ parable.

- † For Jesus isn't talking so much about building a house as he is about building a life—a life that has God as its home, its foundation, its core. Each of us is building a life, and it's not a one-time event, even if we've lived in the same place forever.
- † Some of us build our lives foolishly, some wisely. Which reminds me of a joke. An older woman happened upon a little wizened man rocking back and forth on his porch. He had a serenely contented smile on his face, so she asked him:
 - † “I can't help but notice how happy you look—what's your secret?” “Oh,” he said, waving a smoldering cigarette between thumb and forefinger, “I smoke three packs a day, drink a case of whiskey a week, eat fatty foods, and never exercise.”
 - † “Wow,” said the woman. “How old are you?” “Twenty-six,” the man smiled.
- † Some of us have failed to take the advice of that Master Builder, Jesus, and our lives resemble that of the prematurely aged man on the porch. Things seem pretty good from here, but we don't have much of a future.
- † If we were to build our lives on the foundation of Jesus, what tools would we use? You can find the building blocks in Matthew 5-7, in that most famous sermon of all, the Sermon on the Mount.
- † That sermon has been called the Christian Magna Carta, the Design for Life, the Rules for Christian Living. It contains the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the Golden Rule. It deals with murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and worry. It gives instructions on prayer, giving to the poor, fasting, judging others, and saving money.

- † If you could only read three chapters of the Bible, I'd say, "Read Matthew 5-7." Just listen to this list of phrases from the Sermon on the Mount that form the building blocks of the Christian Life:
- Blessed are the peacemakers, merciful, those who mourn...and you
 - You are the salt of the earth
 - You are the light of the world
 - Let your "yes" be "yes," and your "no" be "no"
 - If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also
 - Love your enemies
 - When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing
 - Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us
 - Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also
 - Seek first the kingdom of God and what you need will be given to you
 - Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself
 - Do not judge, or you, too, will be judged
 - Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find
 - Do unto others as you would have them do to you
 - By their fruit you will recognize them.
- † Of course distilling the teachings of Jesus into a list of aphorisms, or sayings, doesn't do actually putting them into practice justice, does it? Living the Christian life is neither simple nor easy. Even if we try to

live according to Jesus' building code, most of us end up cutting corners. We are human, after all. It's easier to hold onto a grudge than it is to forgive. We want to receive credit for the good we do, but we'd rather have our omissions and commissions (our sins) overlooked than counted up.

- † The houses that are our lives are mixtures of fine workmanship and slapdash construction—let's face it. And we have to live with what we have created. The poet R. L. Sharp put it this way:
- † “Isn't it strange that princes and kings and clowns that caper in sawdust rings; and common people like you and me, are builders for eternity; Each is given a bag of tools, a shapeless mass, a book of rules, and each must make—a stumbling block or a stepping stone.”
- † As we all know, the same stone can be a stepping stone or a stumbling block, depending on the circumstance. But the real test comes when the storms of life come upon us. Most of us can make the house of our life look pretty good when things are going well.
- † The test for the soundness of the structure comes when the storms of life begin to rage and keep on coming. Interestingly, Jesus made it clear that the storms come to both houses, that the rains fall on the just and the unjust. In the parable, neither the house built on rock nor the house built on sand is spared.
- † Of course there are still many that cling to the ancient fallacy that faith in God represents some divine insurance policy against trouble. But the storm in Jesus' parable doesn't discriminate.
- † And you've been there. You know what it's like to have life's storms smash against you and leave you breathless. Whether it's sickness,

broken relationships, depression, money, addictions—you know how shattering and frightening the storms can be.

- † Joan Chittister has written a book called *In the Heart of the Temple*. In it she claims that “the heart of the temple is the world itself, in all its beauty as well as its corruption.” She says that sometimes the fervor of one’s search for deeper meaning in life, for purer depths of the soul, can grow tired and subject to drought. We can become complacent, and instead of being builders of home we can become too settled. Sometimes it’s when disorder erupts that we see what we have falsely accepted for much too long. And then, shaken out of our idleness, we begin again that conversation with God that leads to transformation, to new understanding, to new life.
- † The key is to begin building your home in God before the crisis strikes so that whatever the storms do to you, you will have a foundation upon which to rebuild.
- † C.S. Lewis, in his poignant book, *A Grief Observed*, writes of the truth of this as he recounts the storm of his grief upon the death of his wife, Joy Davidman, who he married late in life. Upon her death, he experienced a loneliness the likes of which he had never known.
- † He tried to reason with himself that he had been happy before he had been married and that he could once again reclaim that happiness. But then a memory would flash through his mind and the pain would bubble up again.
- † In his grief, Lewis turned to God and used the inner resources that God had been equipping him with for so many years. He wrote:

“You never know how much you believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life or death to you.

- † I realized that if my house collapsed with this one mighty blow, it was indeed a house of cards.” Yet Lewis eventually endured the storm because he had built his house upon the rock of Christ—it didn’t mean he didn’t suffer and grieve—but it did mean that he could recover meaning and blessing even in the suffering.
- † May you create a life that has as its core the love of Jesus Christ. And may you feed on him, as we remember together...

Sources:

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Benjamin Reaves, “Building a Life,” www.csec.org

Brett Blair, “Building According to Code,” www.sermons.com