

Sermon for Sunday, August 16, 2009
"What Happens in 80% of Cell Phone Calls"
Rev. Mary Austin
Scripture Reference: Matthew 7:21-29

Nature is against us. If you live in a house, you know what I mean. Grass grows in the sidewalk cracks, little trees take root in the gutters, roots bump up through the patio, and living creatures of all kinds want to make their home in your basement. Maintenance is essential.

Our spiritual lives are the same. We have the same kind of work to do on the inside, too. Our inner laziness, the voice that calls us to follow our fears, our love of shortcuts, and our selfish habits all seek to undermine the structures of our lives. Like homeowners, we're constantly rooting out the destructive, banishing the things seeking to take root in us, maintaining the edges. We have to do the small jobs now to stave off bigger maintenance later.

This passage from Matthew finds Jesus using this same analogy of home building to talk about the life of the spirit. It comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, a long series of lessons that starts with the familiar Beatitudes, and ends with this instruction about how the followers of Jesus are to live. All along, Jesus is drawing attention to the choices in human life. Then he presents a stark choice between following him and a road that leads us nowhere. "Which builder is more like us?" Jesus is asking.

Have we built on the rock? Have we nurtured the faith that will allow us to trust God, even when things are bleak? Or do we have a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately faith? Do we know how to sit and wait, without going crazy? Do know how to pray, or to be quiet in God's presence? Have we nurtured the circle of friends who will see us through? Do we have enough confidence in life's goodness to share bad news with people?

The purpose of all that inner maintenance is revealed when the storms come, and we see what's left standing.

And the storms always come. The illness that taxes our strength, inner and outer. The revelation that our child is on drugs, or has committed a crime. The news of cancer. The unexpected divorce. The loss of a job. The experience of a violent partner. The change in the world we've always known.

I was talking with an interim minister recently, and I asked him about churches that experience a lot of transition. You all know something about that here, as you wait for a new Head of Staff and David's planned retirement. "It turns out," he said, "that most people are in transition most of the time. It's just hard to say from what to what." Change is now constant in our lives. We have layers of change, adding up to stressful times. There are personal changes, with our friends and in our families. Changes in our communities as friends move ahead or leave their homes. Changes in our economy as the auto industry shrinks and Michigan shifts.

Change is the storm that swirls around us all the time. Interesting that Jesus isn't promising that if we build on the rock, then life will be free of storms. Interesting that he isn't advising us to take shelter and wait it out. Interesting that he isn't suggesting that we live in a cave, where nothing can touch us. The storms are part of life for all of us.

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In my younger life, I worked for a company that turned out to be closing, although they would never admit it. One Friday, a number of people were laid off, and on Monday, everyone’s work was reassigned to cover the gaps. Then a few weeks later, more layoffs, and then more job shuffling on Monday. By now, everyone was looking for other jobs, and people started leavings as fast as they could. Offices were empty, and it was hard to figure out who to talk with about what. Most of our circle of friends had moved to other jobs, but our friend Luann stayed on, covering a number of different functions, her same desk now piled high with unfamiliar work. Our circle of friends got together for Happy Hour, and someone asked her, “Luann, you could go anywhere – why are you staying there?”
“I don’t like change,” she said.

We can choose the change, or it will choose us.

And so we need to know where we are – and to whom we belong.

A new study says that 80% of our cell phone calls are about the location of one person or the other. “Where are you?” “I’m on my way – I’ll be there in ten minutes.” “I’m leaving now.” Apparently, we like to know exactly where we are, and where our loved ones are.

If we know where we are, if we’ve built on the rock, we can even choose to move into the storm, instead of waiting for it to go by. We can choose the change we want to see. We can choose to build on our values and beliefs, and create something new, instead of just hoping that the old won’t be blown away. We can choose as individuals, and we can choose as a community of faith. No one here needs to lament for this congregation. Who wouldn’t want the gifts that you all have? Talented people in the congregation, a love of education, a gorgeous setting – great foundations, it seems, for the future.

None of us are perfect builders. All of us have little trees in our spiritual gutters, or cracks in our foundation, or water in the basement. As individuals, and as a community of faith, there’s always maintenance to do. But maintenance doesn’t mean the building is falling down. A few repairs don’t mean the foundation is shaky.

Our nature may be against us – fearful, worried, always cautious – but we’re not building alone. There is a builder better than we are, to whom we turn to shore up the foundation and mend the cracks. We’re never alone.

Change is constant, but all along, Jesus is building beside us. All along, Jesus is mending our efforts and reinforcing our work. All along, we’re building with the Master Carpenter, whose grace fills all of our efforts. Whose strength is the rock underneath it all? With the Master by our side, we can build with confidence and courage, knowing that the future belongs to the builders.

We know where we are, and to whom we belong. Amen.