

A house built on rock
Matthew 7:21-27, Pentecost 3, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Shipping News* tells the story of a man known to the reader by only his last name, Quoyle. Quoyle's life, it seems, is similar to his name. It's a twisted and knotted disaster. Most immediately, Quoyle marries a free spirit named Petal Bear, and though she bears him two daughters, Petal has no mothering instinct. She leaves the family for weeks without notice, and the only time Quoyle knows of her whereabouts is when she calls from bars and taverns three states away to ask him for directions on how to make specific mixed drinks. Petal ends up abducting her daughters and selling them—yes, selling them—after which she crashes her car and dies. In the meantime, Quoyle is fired from his newspaper job and is forced to drive a cab to make ends meet.

Quoyle looks at his life and realizes hopelessly what a shambles it is. He looks at his daughters—recovered from the man who bought them—and wonders what chance they have. He feels exposed, and no matter what he does the foundation seems to shift like sand beneath his feet. But then an old aunt shows up at his door. She doesn't swoop in on a magic umbrella, Marry Poppins-like, with ruddy cheeks and glowing smile. (No *deus ex machina* here!) She's old, crusty, and has a barbed tongue. But she begins to talk to Quoyle for the first time about who he is and where he's come from, about the true foundation upon which his life is built. And there's a house, she says, that the Quoyle family has owned for 150 years. If it's still standing, Quoyle and his girls can have it.

“Where is it?” Quoyle asks. He finds out three days later, after treacherous travel ever-further north, first on highways, then on state roads, then across the northern border and onto paths little more than tire ruts in the mud. The house is on an outcropping from a fishing village on the coast of Newfoundland, jutting out into the unforgiving North Atlantic. The roof is caving, the windows are broken, and the smell is musty, but despite a century of pounding wind and rain the house still stands.

This morning Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount, the very heart of his Gospel message to the faithful. It consists of chapters 5-7 of Matthew, and it's is well worth reading again (if you'll permit your rector to give you some homework). No greater teaching is found anywhere in Scripture—or anywhere, for that matter. And Jesus ends the sermon with this, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his

house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it didn't 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!”

What does a house of faith look like? Upon what is it built? Is it built primarily on doctrine, on a carefully and comprehensively determined set of right beliefs? We most often think in such terms, claiming that our beliefs are right and therefore our foundation is rock. Others' beliefs and convictions by contrast must be wrong, and their foundation is sand. But here's the thing—and this is why I encourage you to read the Sermon on the Mount: In it, Jesus doesn't talk about belief!

In fact, Jesus indicts those today who go around most loudly proclaiming the name of Jesus in defense or support of their beliefs and actions. Despite *our* obsession, the Sermon on the Mount does not talk about doctrine. Rather, it centers—and Jesus says the heart of faith centers—on our relationships with one another and our relationship with God. The character of these relationships is what is the essence of the teaching of Jesus. And so, the mortar, brick, and beam of our house of faith is to consist in all those things Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, things like whether we allow the light of God to shine through us in love; how we reconcile with our friends who we've wronged and in whom we find fault; how we give to those in greatest need; how we love our enemies. That house's foundation will be determined not by just exactly the right, neatly-packaged set of beliefs but by how we orient our lives to the God who creates and loves us.

And there is more. As God himself says in our Old Testament lesson today, “You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul....Teach them to your children; talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”

In other words, we build up this house of faith not only for ourselves but for those who come after us. Its foundation must be so steady and solid that the house will stand and support the lives of those to whom we leave it after we are gone.

As Quoyle and his makeshift family settle into the dwelling on that outcropping of land he discovers is known as “Quoyle's Point,” he learns the old house's history. It was first built on Gaze Island, a mile out into the sea. A century ago, winter life on the island became unbearable for the Quoyles, but the house in which they lived their lives together was sound. *Life was*

troubled, but the house was sound. And so in the middle of winter, the Quoyle men put the house on runners and pulled it a full mile across the frozen sea ice onto Quoyle's Point. And when the weather still sought to shift and compromise the house, the Quoyle clan lashed it with steel cable to iron rings set deep in the rock. The old aunt explains to Quoyle, "They lashed it down and [now] it doesn't move an inch, but the wind singing through those cables makes a noise you don't forget."

Throughout *The Shipping News*, Quoyle's life and the lives of those around him are pummeled, and the house is pummeled. Exposed, Quoyle could not survive. But in the house, which is symbolic of the relationships—past and present—that the aunt brings to bear upon Quoyle, he finds not only survival but *new life*. Quoyle enters into a *household*, if you will, that extends back in time and will be passed on to his own daughters. It *stands* for something: for the light that shines through the Quoyles for one another, even through their knotted and gritty way of being, a light we can legitimately call the light of God. It stands for perseverance and grace in the midst of storms; for relationships of care and love that will not be undone; for the kind of faith that so binds people together that rather than abandon their house to the elements they'll put it on runners and drag it across a mile of ice to a firm foundation.

Here, in this place, we are learning something about building. We are about to restore this grand old church in which we worship each week.

When the structural engineer took his first trip into the undercroft beneath this space, he remarked that the 115-year-old footings that support the pillars of this church are in surprisingly good shape. Physically speaking, this church is founded on rock. That's a good thing. Physically speaking, it has stood for 115 years, and we are readying it to stand for 115 more. But like the house on Quoyle's Point, this *physical* church must be symbolic of a deeper reality among those of us who gather here, or else it's not worth preserving. The relationships of which we are a part here must allow the light of God to shine through us in love; they must nurture the kind of faith in God and in one another that allows us to we reconcile with friends who we've wronged and in whom we find fault; to reach out those among us in need; and to strive to do the difficult work of loving our enemies. *This* is what this house must stand for, if it is to weather all storms. Then it will be worth passing on to our children and to our children's children. This house of faith, this church, will be for us—physically and spiritually—a shelter when the rains and winds and tempests blow. And the sound that sings through the cables which hold it fast will be the voice of God, welcoming us into the kingdom. *Amen.*