

St. Paul's Healdsburg  
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell  
February 23, 2014; the seventh Sunday after Epiphany, year A  
Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; 1; Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23; Matthew 5:38-48; Psalm  
119:33-40

The fishing report from the Wilmington Star News for February 17 reported: *Carolina Beach: red and black drum, whittings, puffer fish. Wrightsville Beach: trout, flounder, red drum, striped bass.*

I just got back from Wilmington NC, where my mother and step father live in a beautiful little neighborhood that's an easy walk from the Intracoastal Water Way, a "highway" for boats and small ships that stretches from Main to Florida.

I didn't grow up in Wilmington. I wish I had, because it's a far more interesting place to be than Charlotte, where I did grow up! Like everybody else I knew I did grow up going to the beach regularly. We would have at least a week at the beach every summer, and then some – fitting it in on long weekends whenever we were able, usually renting a house and piling in with cousins or other families. One of my earliest memories was going to Ocean Isle Beach just south of Wilmington as a very small child and getting in late after it was too dark to actually see the ocean, and trying to fall asleep with the sound of the waves crashing at perfect intervals on the beach. Despite being told that it was waves making the booming noise outside, I imagined a long row of cannons going off one after another.

When I was a kid, the magic of the beach was looking out to sea and imaging how huge it is, and how far that water had traveled that was now washing my feet. There was a thrill of danger, the possibility of being swept out to sea, and at the same time a feeling of being carefree in the warm sand. Taking a holiday on the edge of something so potent as a vast ocean evokes a unique feeling of privilege – not monetary privilege, just blessed.

Now, I'm more interested in another part of the coast. Because of the Intracoastal Water Way, the coast in the Carolinas at least is made up of a series of barrier islands, so to get to what we all consider "the beach" – that expanse of water stretching out to the horizon -- you have to pass over a sound, usually by bridge. Real estate there is either beachfront or sound-side and despite having grown up coveting that beachfront view, and believing that was the only real beach experience, I now prefer the sound-side because there is so much more to see. In the sound, the shifting tides are fascinating to watch as they reveal jagged outcrops of shellfish and crab habitats. In the sound you can see schools of fish, high-stepping birds of all sizes, occasional osprey on the hunt, and even pods of dolphins. One morning this past week I was walking over a bridge going out to Wrightsville Beach and I saw a school of rays. And also, the weather is much gentler on the sound-side – everything seems more solid and settled on the sound-side, less ravaged by the ferocity of wind and ocean.

Most mornings I was there I went walking on a loop around part of Wrightsville Beach, which is the island just a short distance from my parent's house, and one day I wandered into a tiny little museum that is housed in one of the original beach houses build in 1911. In this museum, I learned that all of the older

properties built on the beachfront have been destroyed and rebuilt repeatedly – there are some historic buildings there dating from even before the civil war, but they’ve all been knocked down to their foundation more than once. Every few decades a hurricane comes along and sweeps the sand clean of all but the strongest foundations. It’s just the way things are. No one expects those beachfront properties to be around forever.

In our Epistle lesson for today, Paul is using the analogy of building to talk about what we put into building our lives. I believe he’s talking about the beliefs, practices, and relationships that are the building blocks of any human life. He says that each of us must be a builder, and it’s up to us “to choose with care how to build.” The good news, is that a foundation has already been laid for us, and it’s a good one because it’s been laid by “a skilled master builder” – by Paul himself.

All of our scriptures this morning are about the building materials we can choose to use in constructing our lives. All of the laws in this passage from Leviticus are really about relationships – how we relate to others: share with the poor, don’t lie, don’t steal, be fair, and don’t bear grudges. In short: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” These laws are prefaced with the warning that expectations are high: “You shall be holy, for I the lord your God am holy.”

And then Jesus ups the ante: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” He’s also talking about the kinds of relationships we’ll have with people if we follow the law, but he’s making it sound much harder. Turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give a person more than what they ask for, your cloak as well as your coat. You have to love everyone not just as your neighbor, but as God loves them.

All of these laws, both in Leviticus and what Jesus is talking about, are the building materials from which Paul says we must choose with care. We don’t have to go with these building blocks—we don’t have to follow the law. That’s a choice we are all free to make on our own. But we must be clear that to live is to be building our house, our dwelling place. And if we do choose as our building blocks the law and the teachings of Jesus, we begin to see what it means to be holy. We begin to know what it means to love as God loves. When we use these as the building blocks for our lives, our lives are then incorporated into nothing less than the presence of God. “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.” That’s where our holiness comes from – it’s from God dwelling in us and us in him, because of how our lives our built.

Choosing to love others is as much in our own best interest as it is in the interest of those whom we love. When you love someone, when you’re in a place of showing love, of showing generosity and genuine caring, you know that it’s a joyful place to be. Love, generosity and caring are joyful because they come from connecting with another person, and connecting with the abundance of our own blessings in life. We are free to share when we know ourselves to be blessed, right? Being able to share is a blessing in and of itself! In the same way, you know that when you hold a grudge, it’s your own heart that hurts and your own peace of mind that suffers. Grudges weigh us down and diminish us.

This is Black History month, and riding home on the plane on Friday I read a perfect example of the kind of love Jesus is talking about and how it's good for your soul, how it's life-building. It's an interview with John Lewis who was an influential leader of the civil rights movement and a keynote speaker at the 1963 March on Washington. Today, John Lewis is in US House of Representatives from Georgia. At the end of the interview, he was asked if he had any final thoughts, looking back on the civil rights movement from the perspective of the present. This is what he said "Don't hate; the way of love is a better way. I got arrested a few times during the 60's, I was beaten and left bloody during the Freedom Rides and the March from Selma to Montgomery, but I never became bitter, never became hostile. We have to create this sense of community." (US Airways Magazine, Feb. 2014) That's what John Lewis says, and I will add we have to create this sense of community because that is what it means to build God's temple, where, as we say in the Eucharistic prayer, "God will dwell in us, and we in him."

John Lewis is talking of course about turning the other cheek. He's talking about that contrary logic of Jesus, which Paul warns will look like foolishness to the world, but which will make total sense when it comes to building God's Temple in and through the lives we lead.

"For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God." That's how our Epistle lesson ends --

In fairness to the scripture, Paul isn't saying that we have a choice in this arrangement. We belong to God, and God belongs to us whether we know it or not, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. We are the temple of God regardless of what we do because his foundation has been laid within us. We just have to decide what to build on it.

Thanks be to God --

I don't want to push the analogy too hard, but life can be like a day on the beach. If we're fortunate, we have plenty of days to sit on the warm sand and appreciate the vastness of the ocean stretching out from one end of the horizon to the other, and feel ourselves on the edge of all of that potential, that thrill, and even the possibility of danger. There are nice days of warm sand and fun surf, and there are big storms that will come and blow us down. Paul is saying, whether you've built on the sound side or the beachfront, your foundation is good. Just choose with care your building materials. We can build our lives with networks of generosity or stinginess, with a spirit of abundance or fear of scarcity. We can build with trust or

mistrust, forgiveness or bitterness, love or the absence of love. We have no choice but to build; the choice is what with.

and at the same time feeling warm and happy on the beach, like being there on the edge of something so potent as a vast ocean was a special privilege. Big storms are going to come and go – hopefully we’ve build good strong houses on solid foundations. There is an awelt’s not beach front property, that’s going to get knocked down sooner or later by a big enough storm. The thrill was looking out at

Notice that the outcome for all of these passages is the same: holiness. building on the foundation for holiness.

My good friend and mentor Paul Lautenschlager, the Rector of St. Michael’s in COS and who visited here and preached last September, used to say that every preach has only about three or four sermons in him or her, and one of mine is how much I love the lectionary because of how much all of the scripture fit together – and so I about

In this sea of Doctrine, how easy it is to loose our focus on what’s most important – Jesus is trying to get us to focus.

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

And, we guaranteed that once the building is completed, it’s going to be a good one – really important, in fact. He reminds us that the foundation is not our own, but it is Jesus Christ, but nonetheless we have important decisions to make about how we will life out our lives as God’s temple.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. ..."

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

But also notice, the choice is ours. And the results are important: while we're working on building our lives and our own home, we are also working on building a dwelling place for God: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

And the foundation is Jesus Christ.

Although I still enjoy sitting on the beach on a beautiful summer day, I prefer being on a dock or walking over a bridge, and looking down to see schools of fish, rays skitting across the sandy floor, and the occasional pod of dolphins to crashing waves. But of course it's all good.

Our scripture lessons for this week are all of them, very beautiful, and I think very significant. I started reading them last Saturday at SFO, while I waited for my flight to NC. What popped out at me first was from the Psalm: "Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; \*give me life in your ways." It's easy to understand that sentiment when you're at an airport, which is a place very vulnerable to the influence of media – both in terms of advertisements and trashy gossip magazines. I thought, yep, that's what I'll be preaching on.

But then I got off the plane, and started taking daily walks all around the island of Wrightsville Beach, and I kept reading the scripture appointed for today, and I started thinking, maybe I should be preaching about something else. Maybe that's too narrow a focus, kind of like just looking out to see is too narrow a focus for the coast. Maybe I should preach about the foundations our houses are built upon – about sand and stone and that foundation we are given to build upon. Or maybe I should be preaching on loving our enemies and turning the other cheek, on what means to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect (now there's line in the Bible that deserves some unpacking – that wouldn't be an easy sermon to write.)

Last Saturday morning I found myself at SFO, waiting to board a plane to North Carolina to visit my parents, and while I waited I looked at the scripture for this Sunday. This verse from our Psalm struck me immediately as what I should be preaching about – it was what jumped out at me as profound and most meaningful as I looked out at the sea of people and advertisements and distracting newspapers, magazines, and television screens.

You know, it's easy to believe that now in this media driven, media shaped world in which our lives are to an alarming extent patterned after advertisements and the TV shows we can see on any one of hundreds of channels – it's easy to think that NOW there is an awfully lot available to watch that is worthless. But clearly the psalmist made the same observation some 2000 years ago.