

Christ Church *Sermons*

Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 1, 2008

The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:-24; 8: 14-19; Psalm 46; Romas 1:16-17; 3:22b-28; Matthew 7:21-29

Built On Solid Rock

The wise man builds his house upon the rock. The foolish man builds on sand. This was our favorite song in Vacation Bible School, at least in my day. And, it was always accompanied by hand motions. “The rain came down and the floods came up – and the house on the sand went SPLAT!” It was a memorable lesson for a three year old and I’ve never forgotten it. Foundations matter. You can’t throw up a 10,000 square foot McMansion on shaky pilings and expect it to last – no matter how good it looks on the outside. Neither can you build a stable life simply by “Dressing For Success” or going on “American Idol.” People need strong foundations. Real character does not waver with the shifting sands. Mature human beings have principles that guide them in their decision- making and that uphold them amidst the wind and the rain of this world.

This is really just a truism. But, what I’ve realized after all these years is that the parable of the man who builds on the rock and the man who builds on the sand is the conclusion of Jesus’ Sermon On The Mount. So, the point of the parable is that, here, in the teachings of the Sermon On The Mount, we will find the foundation on which to build our lives. People who hear Jesus’ teaching and do it are the people who build on solid rock. People who hear and know the teaching, but don’t do it, don’t live into it, are building their lives on sand. So, I am delighted that today is the day we honor our graduates. Because, now, I get to offer them a whole philosophy of life – in one sitting. So, here goes – The Highlights of The Sermon On The Mount.

First and foremost, remember, “You are the light of the world.” Your life, apart from anything you may accomplish, is important in itself. Any person who seeks to fulfill his or her unique potential brings The True Light of God into this world. Back in the second century, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon, said, “The Glory of God is a man or woman who is Fully Alive.” Your continuing quest to allow the truth of your life to unfold is what brings you into a relationship with God. There is no religious formula that takes precedence over this. Religion is not the light. Science is not the light. Business, money, success is not the light. The true light, and the thing that has the greatest power to help and guide us, is another human being who lives with integrity. There is no authority greater than that. Yes, there are a lot of experts in this world, and we are glad for them. But, a person who struggles to clear away the illusions of false thinking, and the sloppy habits that keep us in a rut, and all the garbage of things that are really of no value so that their true integrity can shine forth, that person brings God’s Light into this world. On this both Jesus and Mr. Rogers agree - Don’t ever doubt the importance of being you. It is the rock-bottom essential way by which we praise God.

The trouble with this is that we are not alone. There are all those other people, and God seems to love them, too. In fact, life never allows us to be a lone individual. We are constantly being brought into relationships that either hurt us or enhance us. So, the next part of the Sermon on the Mount is about things that get us into trouble with other people. Here are some of the better known verses. “Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” Scary stuff, as Jimmy Carter found to his cost – and, by the way, Jesus did not expect you to take those verses literally. But, they are sound advice, none the less. If we don’t get control over ourselves, we are going to be driven by the most primitive parts of our existence. Our sexual drives, our passions, our impulses, our emotions are all there for good reason, but if they are not sublimated to a higher purpose they become addictive behaviors that can come close to destroying us.

“Love your enemies,” says Jesus. “Pray for those who persecute you.” “Forego revenge on those who spitefully use you.” Because, if we let uncontrolled anger to take over our lives, it extinguishes the Light of God within us; it maims and deforms our own growth. Jesus says it makes

– out of bitter experience - to strive towards it. “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,” say Ghandi, one of the best interpreters of Jesus there has ever been – and too bad he wasn’t a Christian. Healing and Forgiveness need to be central to our purpose on earth. The main thing that God puts into our hands, as mature people, – which you now are – is the responsibility for the repair of this world. It is a daily, hourly, minute by minute responsibility. And, nothing supersedes it. A quarrel with my brother, says one of the ancient writers, is like a vase with two handles. I can pick it up by the handle that is the quarrel – or I can pick it up by the handle that is my brother. That’s the choice. If, in the moment of conflict, we can still discern the humanity of our opponent, that will make all the difference to our own character and to our own inner peace.

Basically, the Sermon On The Mount teaches that love is the moral standard – love that embraces the whole of life for its good. Love is the reason we are in this world. And, that love has to be genuine. “Be not as the hypocrites,” says Jesus. It’s a technical term that comes from the Greek theatre. A hypocrite is a person who wears a mask. It’s someone who is only acting a role. And, love is no act. It’s got to come from within. That’s why Jesus warns us against making a show of our goodness. “When you give alms,” he says, “let it be in secret” – or at least keep your name in really small print on the side of the fund-raising letter. “Pray in secret.” There’s something particularly suspicious about a person who makes a show of their relationship with God.

“Let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no.” Anything more than this, says Jesus, comes from the evil-one. In an age of litigation, I doubt that many of us will feel comfortable doing business on a handshake. But, Warren Buffet does – and his reputation only grows because of it. Let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no. Honesty is the basis of trust, and it is the foundation of character. Justice Scalia once recalled that in his youth he brought home a straight A report card. His father congratulated him, but then he said, “You know, Nino, I can buy brains, what I can’t buy is character, and that’s what you’ve really got to strive for.” Jesus agrees. He says, don’t try to serve two masters; don’t divide your loyalties; don’t pretend to virtues you don’t have. Keep your ethics simple. “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do the same for them; for this is the law and the prophets.”

That’s not easy. So much of this world is flawed, if not downright annoying. But, don’t take it on yourself to be a correction society of one. “Judge not,” says Jesus, “that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” When we take it as our duty to set other people straight, that battle usually traps us in a whirlpool of judgment and blame. Don’t get into it, says Jesus. Keep Free! Try to keep clear of people who are not ready to live a loving and affirming life. Actually, Jesus could not be more direct on this. He says, “Do not throw your pearls before swine.” There are lots of people in this world whose influence will diminish us; who will put out our light and draw us into the dark side. They are “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” says Jesus. They are like “trees that never bear fruit.” Stay away from them. When people cannot receive the gift of your light, then don’t keep trying to give it to them. Move on. Eventually, God will sort them out. Our job is to keep to the straight path, to enter by the narrow gate, to seek first the Kingdom of God, and to let our light shine. So, be adventurous in your life. Don’t hold back. Don’t limit your vision. “Ask and you will receive – Seek and you will find – Knock and doors will be opened for you. Because life yields to the brave heart, and God honors those who live by faith.

There are plenty more things in the Sermon On The Mount but, generally, they can be grouped under these highlights. This is the essential teaching of Jesus. It’s up to you to choose to practice it, and to let it direct and shape your life. If you do, then, all the storms of this world can rise up against you, but the house that you build on this rock will always stand firm.