

August 26, 2018



“STRONG FOUNDATIONS”

Matthew 7:24-29

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There is an internet story from an unknown author about a young boy who once went up to his father and asked, “Dad, why does the wind blow?”

The father replied, “I don't know, son.”

The little boy then asked, “Dad, where do the clouds come from?”

“I'm not sure, son,” said the father.

Undaunted, the little boy asked another question, “Dad, what makes a rainbow?”

“I have no idea, son,” said the father.

Finally, the little boy asked, “Dad, do you mind me asking you all these questions?”

“Not at all, son,” said the father. “How else are you going to learn?”¹

We human beings are naturally inquisitive, aren't we? Children, especially, seem drawn to learning about the world around them, don't they? They ask questions as they grow to understand more and more. The biggest struggle for us is when a child asks a hundred questions that all begin with “Why?”, isn't it? In those moments, we can almost identify with the father in the story, can't we?

On the other hand, it can also be fun to watch them integrate what they are learning about the world around them. The other day, Dawn and I were sitting at the lunch table with our four-year old niece, Ella, who was starting off stories and encouraging us to continue them. For instance, she would begin to tell the story of a princess who seemed to have a day that went a lot like Ella's day. Then Ella would invite one of us to continue by telling the next part of the story. Whenever the story made its way to me, I found a way to bring the story to a close with the same conclusion, “And they lived happily ever after.” It wasn't long before Ella caught on and made me start some stories of my own so that I wasn't drawing all of hers to the same conclusion. I'm often amazed at how quickly she figures me out.

Our scripture lesson from Matthew's gospel this morning is taken from the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. A rabbi, or teacher, at heart, Matthew portrays Jesus preaching to the crowds on a side of a hill from chapters five through seven. While Jesus touches on a variety of topics including the beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, a few commandments, and judgment, he concludes the sermon with a familiar story for many of us.

I don't know about you, but I learned the core of this teaching in my Sunday School days through a song.

1. The wise man built his house upon the Rock,
The wise man built his house upon the Rock,
The wise man built his house upon the Rock,
And the rains came tumbling down.
The rains came down and the floods came up,
The rains came down and the floods came up,
The rains came down and the floods came up,
But the house on the Rock stood firm.

2. The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
The foolish man built his house upon the sand,
And the rains came tumbling down.
The rains came down and the floods came up,
The rains came down and the floods came up,
The rains came down and the floods came up,
And the house on the sand went splat.²

Jesus' closing parable, or story, is about two people who build their homes. One is built on a rock and the other is built on sand. You might notice that there's not much different from the work that either of them do in the song or in the actual scripture lesson. The homes could even be quite similar. The problem is not with the quality of the construction or the beauty of the home. The problem isn't necessarily seen by the average onlooker or neighbor. From the outside, the two homes could be built the same. The problem lies not in the construction material, but in the foundation, in the base. The foundation for one house is rock and for the other is sand.

Growing up in Michigan, I always imagined a nice beach house along the shores of one of the Great Lakes when I thought of the house built on sand. M. Eugene Boring notes in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary, however, that in Palestine the ground is either rocky and strong or sandy. When the rains fall upon the sands, everything is washed away.³ Unlike my childhood images, this is not a beach house, but a house that could be washed right down the hillside. No matter how sturdy the house looks, no matter the construction materials used, if the base is not solid, the house is doomed to fall when the rains fall heavily on it and the wind beats against a sandy foundation.

As Jesus concludes his sermon, he emphasizes that what is most important is not simply hearing the words that he has shared, but putting them into practice; incorporating them into one's life.

Disciples build their lives upon a solid foundation when what they've heard from him is integrated into their daily lives. Our lesson begins, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock."⁴ Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way in *The Message*: "These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build your life upon. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock."⁵

This Sunday, we are celebrating education in the life of our congregation. As parents, educators, students, and our communities prepare to return to school in the coming weeks, it's important for us to pause to remember them in our prayers this morning. In our scripture lesson, Jesus noted the importance of exhibiting a solid foundation from what we have learned from him. When we begin to exhibit what we have learned from Christ in our daily lives, we are being transformed. In a same way, when our children experience a solid educational foundation in school, home, and church, they experience transformation and growth in their lives, as well. Solid foundations of faith and education have the power to transform the world around us.

In addition to pausing to pray for those returning to school this week, our Church and Society Committee is hard at work to make sure that a basic need for children at Schulze Elementary (where we have tutored) is met this year. They have a goal that together we can help to put new shoes on the feet of 600 elementary school children. That's 1200 shoes on 1200 feet as school begins. As of earlier this week, we had just over 180 pairs of shoes. Some of us have gone out and purchased the shoes for some of the kids already. Some of us have made donations at \$20 per pair to support the project.

As school is getting ready to start up, we'd like to see this dream materialize for these students so they and their families can focus on learning rather than whether they have the money for a pair of shoes as school begins. Since Schulze Elementary School is planning to have representatives here on September 9 for our Fall Kick-Off event, I'm hoping that this week you can not only help us by making a donation, but perhaps you might help by getting the word out so that others can join us in this effort as well. Let's start the school year off the right foot for the kids at Schulze. You can find out more on how to donate on our website at www.fumcbirmingham.org/shoe or you can make a donation now by texting "20 shoes" to 248-368-0033.

Matthew tells us that "When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."⁶ For Matthew, could it be that the authority with which Jesus taught was the way that he lived what he taught? When our actions align with what we teach, there is an authenticity to what we have said. We might call it "practicing what we preach."

When we think back on those educators that had the greatest impact on our own lives, the stories we tell are so often those who not only taught us great lessons in class, but lived them with us in life. I'll never forget my high school world history teacher, Mr. McMillin. Mr. McMillin not only taught about the world's greatest wars and fights, but then took us downtown to learn about our local history and culture at the Detroit Historical Society and the Detroit Institute of Arts. In his

spare time, he brought students of different cultural backgrounds together in our changing suburban school to help us to learn from one another.

While I might have forgotten some of the dates and times of that were in my history books or on exams, I'll always remember how he worked to foster hope and encourage understanding among his students. He brought us together to focus on a common future with one another as we learned the lessons of our history.

Not too long ago, we reconnected on Facebook. Retired for many years now, he still leads groups to Detroit to share his passion for the city and its rich history. Whether it's cultural tours at the DIA or the Historical Society or tours of churches and talks about Detroit's historical presence in the Underground Railroad and Civil Rights movements, he's still transforming communities as he did with some high school students years ago.

In a poem entitled *I'd Rather See a Sermon*, author Edgar Guest captures the heart of the impact that solid foundations have in one's life. He writes:

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye is a better pupil, more willing than the ear;
Fine counsel is confusing, but example is always clear,
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.

I can soon learn how to do it if you will let me see it done;
I can watch your hand in action, but your tongue too fast may run.
And the lectures you deliver may be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lesson by observing what you do.
For I may misunderstand you and the high advice you give,
But there is no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

When I see a deed of kindness, I am eager to be kind.
When a weaker brother stumbles, and a strong man stands behind
Just to see if he can help him, then the wish grows strong in me
To become as big and thoughtful as I know that friend to be.
And all travelers can witness that the best of guides today
Is not the one who tells them, but the one who shows the way.

One good man teaches many; men believe what they behold;
One deed of kindness noted is worth forty that are told.
Who stands with men of honor learns to hold his honor dear,
For right living speaks a language which to everyone is clear.
Though an able speaker charms me with his eloquence, I say,
I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day.⁷

The greatest sermons, or lessons, are perhaps those that are lived as a witness to who we are and who God is calling us to be. Or as we may have learned years ago:

So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
And the blessings will come down.
The blessings come down as your prayers go up,
The blessings come down as your prayers go up,
The blessings come down as your prayers go up,
So build your life on the Lord.⁸

¹ <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/111599-importance-of-education>.

² Adapted from https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/The_Wise_Man_and_the_Foolish_Man/

³ Boring, M. Eugene. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. viii. Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 218.

⁴ Matthew 7:24, NRSV.

⁵ Matthew 7:24-25, *The Message*.

⁶ Matthew 7:28-29, NRSV.

⁷ <http://www.kubik.org/lighter/example.htm>.

⁸ Adapted from https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/The_Wise_Man_and_the_Foolish_Man/.