

A Hole and a Skyscraper

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Luke 6:39-49
1 Corinthians 3:1-11

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Luke 6: 39-49

39 He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? 40 A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. 41 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. 43 "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. 46 "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? 47 I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48 That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

1 Corinthians 3: 1-11

1 And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? 4 For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted,

Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. 10 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.

11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.



What makes a skyscraper stand? It's one of those questions which pops into my head every once in awhile. Like, what makes an airplane stay in the air? Or how does a radio know to catch particular invisible waves that float around us all the time? Or one my absolute favorite – did Adam have a belly button?

Why don't skyscrapers fall over? I'm not an engineer, so I really don't know, but it definitely scares me. I love being in the city but when I walk down those streets – like Chestnut Street or Market Street – I can just feel those buildings closing down on me. It's sort of like claustrophobia I suppose and it used to be a whole lot worse when I was a kid. The buildings surround me and I feel a bit trapped.

And the worst part of it is that I just don't know why they stay up. There's a lot of weight – tons of steel and concrete and glass – all of it piled up on top of itself. Why don't skyscrapers just fall over? Obviously I'm not an architect. If I was, maybe I wouldn't be so concerned about them falling.

And what about when you go inside one of those buildings? Have you ever felt one sway with the wind – back and forth? They say that they're built that way – to withstand a certain amount of

movement because of the wind – but I just don't know. Even on the second or third floor of a mall, I can feel the floor shake and sway. It's true! I'm not crazy – at least I don't think I am !!??

We place a lot of trust in our architects and engineers and builders. These are people that go through a lot of training and education and we pay them a lot of money to design our buildings so that they don't fall down on top of us. And I guess we're safe in trusting those people because rarely do we hear of a building collapsing unexpectedly.

What makes a skyscraper even more interesting is the fact that it sits on top of a big hole. Have you ever thought about that? A big hole! Have you ever walked past a construction site in the city and peeked through the holes in the fence to see what's going on in there? You really should, you know. It's important for you to see just what you're getting into when you get into one of those buildings. There's a hole inside that fence – a big hole – a hole big enough to drive in bulldozers and dump trucks and cranes. In fact, I was in a hotel recently and I looked down from the hotel window and it overlooked a construction site – nothing but mud, mud, mud after all the rain and sleet and snow. The beginning of a building way down deep in a hole full of mud.

It's incredible! How can a building stand on such a mess? We pile all of this steel and concrete and glass on top of itself and we put all that stuff right on top of – a big hole. But again we don't have to worry too much because we pay some people a whole lot of money to design that hole the right way. That hole becomes a foundation for the building and it's strong enough and big enough and designed just the right way so that the building doesn't fall over.

In Luke's "Sermon on the Plain," the author invites us into a Jesus-moment as he teaches his followers – teaches them about foundations. The true follower is like the person “building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock.” Remember the

Sunday School song – "The wise man builds his house upon the rock, ... the foolish man builds his house upon the sand ... the rains came down and the floods came up ... "

Jesus explains that we can't just use words to call ourselves followers but rather we must use our actions along with our words. It's all well and good to call him "Lord, Lord" but if we are not going out and using what we are taught, we're like that foolish person who builds on a foundation of sand and the flood washes the house away. What we need to do is build our foundation on sturdy ground – on the rock – on the words and actions of our faith.

How easy it is for us to say "I'm a Christian" but only mean that "I go to church on Sunday morning". How easy it is to say "I'm a Christian" but walk right past a homeless person sitting on a subway vent without making sure he or she is okay. How easy it is to say "I'm a Christian" but then try to justify the wars that we continue to bury ourselves in. How easy it is to say "I'm a Christian" while believing that those who we call “undocumented immigrants” – or anyone who looks or acts differently than us – are somehow inferior despite the fact that we are each created in God's image. "Why do you call me Lord, Lord," Jesus asks, "and do not do what I tell you?"

What is important in our lives? Jesus has tried to teach us so many things, but have we learned? Do we do the things he taught us?

Blessed are the peacemakers – are we peacemakers? We wage war in Iraq and Afghanistan and wherever we feel our interests are threatened. Love your enemies as yourself – do we love our enemies? – do we love ourselves even? Not an easy task, right? Turn the other cheek; love God with all your heart and soul and mind; do not kill; do not commit adultery; feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, pray for the prisoner. Those are the basics. Do we do any of

these or do we just walk around saying "I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian" just like the "Lord, Lord" of the disciples in Luke?

I sang and prayed and laughed and cried and ate with a group yesterday gathered at St. Luke UMC in Bryn Mawr in a prayer vigil protesting the kind of racial profiling legislation which Arizona lawmakers have adopted and calling for fair and just immigration reform in the US. This is only one of hundreds of sessions which are part of the Isaiah 58 National Solidarity Vigil and Fast for Arizona, a rolling prayer vigil making its way from the East Coast to the West Coast until the end of July. I felt a clear and solid foundation in Jesus' call to love one another, to care for those who suffer, to bind the wounds of those who are injured.

When we walk into a skyscraper built over a big hole, it's nice to know that there is a sturdy foundation underneath. But in our lives, we need to know that there is a strong foundation to hold us up. When we are flooded by the world – by temptation and ignorance; by anger and arrogance; by evil and corruption – we need to know that there is a foundation on which we stand. For us that foundation is Jesus.

In the church where I grew up, I was the church historian during our 100th anniversary. I discovered in some old records a list of items that had been deposited in the original cornerstone but because of later additions to the building the cornerstone was no longer where it was supposed to be. I was determined to find it – and it became a challenge for me, an obsession even. I wanted to find that cornerstone and get it opened so we could see the items that the church founders thought were important to put there. The building was built in the 1870s and among other things like coins and letters, there was supposed to be a piece of the apple tree under which the surrender was signed by Confederate troops at Appomattox Court House at the conclusion of the Civil War. Being the history-geek that I was – that I am – I wanted to see it.

I never found it. To this day, I wonder where that cornerstone is. The building still stands – no longer a United Methodist Church – and whenever I drive by it I look longingly for that cornerstone.

St. Paul's Church in Richmond, Virginia had a similar problem. A guest preacher was invited to speak at an anniversary celebration. The preacher wanted to find out some facts about the laying of the cornerstone and the construction of the church. As it turned out, records were destroyed when Richmond was burned during the Civil War, so no one knew where the cornerstone was or what was in it. The preacher was not dismayed. With just as much enthusiasm, he preached his sermon taking his text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus." (1 Corinthians 3:11).

It didn't matter that that cornerstone couldn't be found. And it doesn't really matter that I can't see what's in the cornerstone to my childhood church. What matters for that Virginia church and for any church is that they still stand and that they stand because of a different foundation. A foundation with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. And just as those building cornerstones are missing, we sometimes can't find the cornerstone in our lives. The cornerstone that holds tight the pieces of our lives so they don't crash into the big hole on which we sit. The fact that we can't find our cornerstone doesn't mean it's not there.

We oftentimes say "Lord, Lord", "I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian", thinking that the building where we gather makes us such. But that's not it at all. To say "Lord, Lord" we can only be sincere when we follow it with our actions. Our foundation depends not on the cornerstone of some building but upon how we respond to the more important cornerstone of our existence.

Sometimes we are blind to that cornerstone, but just as the cornerstone to a building – just as the strength of a hole that supports a skyscraper – Jesus is there at the corner of our foundation.

If we take all the stuff that makes up our lives – all the anger and confusion and frustration and guilt – all the fear and concern and compassion and love – all the stuff of our lives – and pile it all on top of itself, we come up with a pretty massive skyscraper. And we can drop all of that stuff on top of the emptiness of a big hole, but it's going to fall when the world floods in around us. The only way for our life's skyscrapers to stand is to put them on top of a sturdy foundation built around the cornerstone that is the Christ. That foundation has to be built with our faith -- not just the faith that we *say* we have but the faith that comes out in our action -- the faith that we do. The foundation that we place our life's skyscrapers on has to be us doing our Christianity -- not just being it. We have to follow up our "Lord, Lord with "Yes, God, I'll do it." That's the only foundation that can be strong enough to hold us up. It's the only foundation strong enough for this church, for any church, for any truly faithful follower of the Christ.

Like a skyscraper, we sway and bend and flex -- and like a skyscraper, we don't have to collapse if our foundation is built properly. From that deep hole in our lives we build a foundation of faith and action with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. Though we may sway, we will not fall if our strong. We can withstand the flood.

Amen.