***PARABLES THAT PREACH: A GOOD FOUNDATION***

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Texts: Luke 6:46-49 and 1 Corinthians 3:9b-11

A few weeks ago, we vacationed at North Topsail Beach in North Carolina. At low tide, the beach is wide and flat – great for walking, but we were surprised how far up the water came at high tide – only a few yards from the base of the steps onto the beach. There were sections of beach where there was an obvious attempt to reconstruct sand dunes, piling up sand and planting parallel rows of young seagrasses in desperate hope of helping the dunes hold. A friend told me that years ago developers at Topsail made the dubious decision to bulldoze the natural dunes to provide clearer views and easier access to the ocean for houses that lined the beach. Now those houses are almost on the beach as the water rises closer and closer to them. In recent years, some houses on the far north end of the island were washed away in storms; it is hard to imagine that they will be the last, given the rising tide of climate change! Matthew’s version of that parable we heard this morning comes to mind – the wise man builds his house upon the rock; the foolish man builds his house upon the sand.

Perhaps Luke had a beach house of his own, and so skips any mention of sand, instead casting Jesus’ parable as stressing the importance of building on a firm foundation. The point is the same: the house built upon the rock, the house with the solid foundation, is the house that survives the storms and floods that come its way, while the house built on sand without the protection of dunes, or with a flimsy foundation, or with no foundation at all, collapses. “Great was the ruin of that house,” says Jesus. A year ago, we saw what the great ruin of a house with a poor foundation looks like when the towering condos in Surfside, FL came crashing down. It is not a pretty sight!

But we all know this parable is not really about architectural dos and don’ts or proper building codes. It was addressed to the crowd gathered on the plain (Matthew has them gathering on the Mount because for Matthew really important things always happen on the Mount), and was told by Jesus in response to a question he himself posed: ‘Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’, and do not do what I tell you?” Why indeed?

Calling Jesus “Lord” means nothing if we are not willing to follow his teaching: live as he calls us to live and love as he calls us to love and forgive as he calls us to forgive and serve as he calls us to serve. His teaching and example are the rock upon which a solid foundation for faith and life is built. Paul goes so far as to suggest that it is Jesus himself who is the foundation for our lives. It is that foundation that will sustain us when the storms of life roll in – regardless of what those storms might be – and that same foundation that will crumble if we neglect it or do not build upon it. What then is the foundation upon which you build your life – is it rock solid or vulnerable to crumbling when ill winds begin to blow?

As you may know, Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter were long involved as volunteers with Habitat for Humanity. At the dedication of a Habitat home, President Carter liked to present to the homeowners two things: a Bible and a board. The Bible reflected his personal faith and offered testimony to the faith tradition upon which Habitat was established. The board, signed by all the volunteers who worked on the construction of the house, was a symbol of community and the hope-giving work that brought people of different faiths together in a common cause. “*I know that Christian beliefs correlate very closely with those of other great religions concerning love and care and benevolence*,” says President Carter. “*All of us who have different kinds of faith look for ways to put our beliefs into actual, practical action*.” As Christians seeking ways to make a difference, Mrs. Carter says, “*It’s just something you do. That’s what my faith means to me*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

That is what faith ***should*** mean to all of us – putting faith into action, living into the faith we profess. Our words and actions offer a faithful or unfaithful response to that question Jesus posed, depending on whether we do what Jesus calls us to do – or not. Following Jesus is not a passive activity; it demands action consistent with Christ’s call, for our actions speak louder than any words about what we believe and who we follow. You cannot call yourself a Chrisitan and then refuse to live and serve as Christ calls you to do. But neither is it faithful to do the right things for all the wrong reasons – in order to garner praise from others or to exalt yourself. The inspiration for our actions should be the faith that is the foundation for all the choices we make – faith in Christ who we claim to follow; that faith that spurs us to do what we do. The challenge is to keep doing what we do for the right reason – as an act of faithfulness – rather than for some other motive, for it is all too easy to find ourselves building on less faithful foundations.

The story is told of a little lifesaving station on a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occurred. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night, risking life and limb, to search for the lost. Many lives were saved by the crews of this little station, and it became famous. Some of those who were saved from the sea, as well as neighbors in the area, wanted to help with the work of the little station. They donated time, money and effort. New boats were purchased, new crews trained, and the little lifesaving station grew.

Over time, some members of the lifesaving station became unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So, they replaced the emergency cots with beds with mattresses and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Soon the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for the members; they decorated it beautifully with nautical themes, and furnished it comfortably, and began to use it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in risking their lives by going to sea, so they hired lifeboat crews to do that dangerous work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club’s decoration, and there was even a liturgical lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship wrecked off the coast. The hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, a huddled mass of multi-colored, multi-national, multi-lingual refugees from the sea. The beautiful club was in chaos, and so when the dust settled, the property committee had a shower house built just outside the club so that victims of any shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting of the club, there was a split among the membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s lifesaving activities since they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Other members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called “a lifesaving station.” But they were voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station – down the coast. And so they did!

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved from a lifesaving station into a club and yet another new lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown![[2]](#endnote-2)

Shipwrecks are still frequent in these waters in which we live, and we are called to help those who are drowning, including those drowning in sorrow or poverty or despair or hopelessness or fear – as Christ calls us to do. For storms will come – be they COVID, or cancer, or inflation, or the death of a spouse, or a hurricane, or another derecho – and if we are to survive and help others survive too, then we must be sure that our house is built on a firm foundation that can weather the storm. For, it is not enough to call yourself a lifesaving station, if you don’t save lives, and it is not enough to call yourself Christian, if you do not follow Christ and do as he calls you to do! And what he calls you to do is to love and serve God and one another each day, every day. “*Each builder must choose with care how to build*,” writes Paul. Choose with care how you build, what you build, and the foundation upon which you build; choose that firm foundation which is Jesus Christ – and then build well! Amen

1. *Habitat World*, September 2010, pp.13-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Parable” by Theodore Wedel, taken from *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling*, Howard Clinebell, Jr., pp.14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)