

June 1, 2008 – Pentecost 3
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

Texts: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28 / Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24 / Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-31
Matthew 7:21-29

Hymn: “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #597)

Grace to you and peace from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A house built on sand will fall; a house built on rock will stand strong.

In the 1980’s, when gasoline was \$1.69 a gallon and nobody worried about carbon emissions, the Musselman family would pile into the Buick for long cross-country road trips, and the three girls would spend hours in the backseat singing to entertain ourselves. Our favorite song was one that we would sing over and over again at the top of our lungs, in harmony, with my older sister singing the descant—which must have been difficult for our parents to bear, even if three children singing in the backseat is a step up from three children fighting in the backseat. This favorite song of ours was one we had learned at our Lutheran elementary school, “Don’t Build Your House on the Sandy Land,” and I’ll spare you the singing of it but listen to the lyrics—and listen carefully because they’re not exactly the same as Matthew tells the story:

Don't build your house on the sandy land;
Don't build it too near the shore.
Well it might look kinda nice but you'll have to build it twice
Oh, you'll have to build your house once more.

You better build your house upon a rock.
Make a good foundation on a solid spot,
Where the storms may come and go
But the peace of God you will know.

My sisters and I grew up with this song; we loved it; we sang it so many times that we internalized its message; and yet, we never interpreted it as threat or danger—because we were convinced that we were perfect examples of the people in the song who build their house upon a rock. Baptized into Christ and educated at a Lutheran elementary school, we were convinced of our own salvation. We trusted that we were among the saved, that God was our rock. We were also children who had never visualized the collapse of buildings—this was long before the Twin Towers collapsed, and before the days when televisions were routinely covered with images of destruction wrought by natural disasters: Hurricane Katrina, Tsunamis, earthquakes in China, tornados in the Midwest, a cyclone in Myanmar—we didn't have these images in our heads, and so it was easy for us to believe that a second chance comes easily. If your house collapses, as the song says, you simply build it twice. Sure, there are some bad consequences if you choose to build your house upon the sandy land, but even when it falls you'll get the chance to build your house once more. And the song always ends the same way: with the peace of God.

A house built on sand will fall; a house built on rock will stand strong. It's easy to read this parable from today's gospel lesson as comfort—as my sisters and I did while singing our favorite childhood song—to know that life will be difficult at times, but no matter what storms come your way, you can stand strong with the help of God, in the grace freely offered by Christ. If you do stumble, you have the chance to rebuild. And at the end of the story is confidence that the peace of God has the final word, and that you are included in that peace of God. This is the interpretation we just sang about in our opening hymn. And this comforting reading of the story is probably what the editors of

our hymnal had in mind when they suggested today's gospel lesson as one of the recommended readings for the liturgy of marriage. Build your household together upon God, and all will be well!

A house built on rock will stand strong. That's the easy part. The problem for us, in Matthew's telling of this story, comes with the rest of the parable—and here's where Jesus' version of the parable is different from the song I just quoted. When Jesus tells it, the story about the wise man who builds on rock is sandwiched in between a foolish man who builds on sand and the hypocrites who Jesus denounces. And the implication is this: no matter how well you build your life, no matter how good your works look to outside observers, it's not enough: unless you're founded on the right foundation you are doomed to fail, *and great will be your fall*. And that's where Jesus chooses to stop talking! This parable, which comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, ends with judgment and doom. Not with perpetual chances to rebuild—but with a single great fall that echoes Jesus' words to the hypocrites earlier in the story: *I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers. Not everyone who calls out 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven*. As much as the Sermon on the Mount begins with blessing, it ends with judgment. We presume that by this point in Jesus' sermon—which is so long that it takes up three chapters in Matthew's gospel—the crowds are sitting silently and hanging on Jesus' every word. He has a captive audience; he can end the sermon any way he wants; and he chooses these words: *and great was its fall!* And then, Matthew says, the crowds were *astounded*, a word which in the Greek carries connotations of deep fear as well as astonishment. They were astounded, filled with fear.

Jesus seems to be saying in this story, as he does so often in the gospel of Matthew, that there is a right way to be a Christian and a wrong way. And discipleship isn't merely about having been given the gift of faith—it's also about how we live out this faith. The wise man who builds on rock and the foolish man who builds on sand are not initially so different: they've *both* heard the word of God, and they *both* try to build good houses. The primary difference between them is whether they *act* on God's word. The one who builds a house on rock is the person who hears God's word and *acts* on it, Jesus says. The one who builds a house on sand is the person who hears God's word and *doesn't act* on it. Jesus seems to be saying, *human actions matter*. The way we build our lives has consequences, not only for ourselves but for others.

This is important for us to remember as we finish up the academic year and begin to scatter for summer vacations; as we ponder in our times of transition how God might be calling us to live in the world; as we think about how to vote and how to travel and how to structure our finances and how to study. Human actions matter. Jesus wants us to hear God's word and *act on it*. It's important for us to remember as we walk across the campus and hear the rallying cries of the university's Dining Hall workers who work without getting health care or benefits; as we turn on our televisions and see images of houses and schools crushed by natural disaster; as we struggle with the impulse to ignore the suffering that constitutes Darfur and Iraq and Englewood and the hospital down the street. Jesus says: hear my word *and act on it*. If you don't know what Jesus means when he talks about acting on his word—how it might apply to your life—look at the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Human actions matter—but the story is not even that simple, because immediately before telling the parable of the wise builder and the foolish builder Jesus demolishes the idea that human actions can be enough to save us. Those who call out “Lord, Lord” and those who cast out demons in his name; those who prophesy and those who do great deeds of power: none of it will save them! Outside actions simply aren’t enough. What matters is the Spirit that motivates their action, the Word that moves them to act, the foundation on which they build.

This is why Jesus’ story of the wise and foolish builders is not merely a first-century version of the three little pigs, where the outcome depends on the quality of materials used to construct the house. In Jesus’ story, what matters is not the house itself but the foundation. A perfectly strong house of brick will still crumble if its foundation is not secure. A weak house of straw might, by the grace of God, stand if it is built on a strong rock, a rock that *is* the grace of God. If we hear God’s word and act on it, we are like the wise man—but even our action itself is a gift from God because God’s Word is one that springs forth into action. The rock is underneath us even before we begin to build, even before the thought of building crosses our minds. From the beginning we’re inspired by the Spirit who sealed us at our baptism, and we’re animated by the Word that launches us into lives of action.

After Jesus said these words, the crowds were astounded—because he spoke as one who has authority. It’s the same authority that he will later claim at the Great Commission. Authority, in the Greek, means literally “out of one’s being” [*ex-ousia*]. Jesus, God’s Word in the flesh, spoke *ex-ousia* (out of his being)—and the crowds were astounded. Not because of what he said, but because his words were of God, and it’s a

Word that not only speaks but *accomplishes*. A Word that is action, that works in us through the Spirit.

And this is why, in the end, it is okay for us to read the parable with comfort—to know that we are baptized into Christ and have God as our foundation; to trust that we are among the saved; to believe that even when we fail God will help us rebuild. It's why we can sing, as we did in the opening hymn, with hope: “and then, when gray hairs shall their temples adorn, like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.” How firm a foundation! Amen.