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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

January 31, 2016

Series: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: “A Firm Foundation”

Scripture: Matthew 7:24-29, Romans 3:19-28

 Our gospel reading for this week is the parable about the wise man who hears the teaching of Jesus and puts it into practice and the foolish man who hears the same teaching but does not put it into practice in his life. The difference, Jesus says, is like building a house on the strong foundation of rock versus the weak foundation of sand.

 “Which way do you want to learn,” Jesus asks us, “the easy way, or the hard way?”

 Our worship series is about learning how to live with our hands free, and our hearts open, putting God first in everything. And just like in this parable, there are two ways to do this. We can listen to the wisdom of Jesus and of others and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and take steps to build a strong foundation for our lives that will last not only through the storms of life, but also eternally, or we can go with what most everyone else is doing, what seems most fun or easiest in the moment, and find as the storms of life come along that our foundation is washing away.

 I found this photo this week that goes along well with this series. It is hard to think about much of anything else when your hands are this full, isn’t it? But often this is what life feels like. It’s not very intentional, but mostly crisis mode. We can’t even see her face.

 It’s hard to build a strong foundation when you’re in crisis mode. So as we think about our hands today, we might want to ask, what do I most often reach for in life? Is it just the quick fix for this moment, or is it what will truly last and have a long term impact?

 As we think about our hearts today, are they open to the wisdom, the friendship and the needs of others? Or do we always have other things covering our face so that we can’t really see them and they can’t see us?

 As we think about keeping God first, are we really allowing God to set the direction and the priorities in our life? Are we listening and implementing like the wise man or listening and not making any changes like the foolish man? Are we building a foundation that will last eternally?

 Earlier in chapter 6, Jesus puts it this way, “Do not store up your treasures on earth where moths rust and destroy, where thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven.” In other words, build a strong foundation in life that will last, not matter what storms of life might come along.

 If a tornado swept through our community, or a house fire or an accident happened and you lost everything, what kind of foundation would you have left?

 Rachel May Stafford describes a situation with a tornado that completely destroyed everything an older man named Frank owned. His whole life was blown away. But when she saw him afterward, she was amazed to see that he was happy and at peace. As she questioned him, he said he had his wife and his dog and his faith, that was all he needed, all that mattered.

 As she reflected on this she realized, “Because Frank carried his foundation on the inside, not the outside, he had solid footing that enabled him to hold on and carry on, even in times of tragedy.”

 That’s the kind of strong foundation Jesus encourages us to build for our lives. So how do we do this? What are the key components of building a strong foundation that endures through the storms of lie and eternally?

 The first component is making it a priority to have our hands free to reach out in our relationships. Whether it means that we let go of some of the stuff that we hold on to so tightly, or that we learn how to set it down for a time, we make our relationships a priority. We make sure the people around us, our family and our friends are more important than our to-do lists. We make sure that that people around us are more important to us than our pride, enforcing our agenda, our soap boxes or hobby horses that we tend to get on without thinking. It means that we set down those things that are preoccupying us so that in this moment we can be fully present to those we love most in this moment.

 The moment is important. There is often a window of opportunity to have a pivotal moment of care of laughter, of love in a relationship. And you can’t force it. You can invite it, but mostly you just have to be ready for it. When we intentionally free our hands, we become ready to respond when someone literally or metaphorically extends their hand to us.

 This hand extended can be in encouragement, in love, or in desperation. They may need a lifeline right now. And if we can’t see them, or if our hands are too full, we can’t be their emergency contact. What a gift it is to know that someone is there for you at any hour, any day—that their hands are free and hearts open enough that they will drop everything and reach back with unconditional love and grace to laugh and cry with you when you need them most.

 This takes an intentional focus on building relationships. It takes being aware and asking the heart questions. It takes walking with and listening to rather than fixing.

 And it takes being vulnerable and trusting them to do the same for you. It’s about building a foundation on unconditional faithful love so that even when all else fails, in life you are there for those family members and friends and they are there for you.

 The next component of a strong foundation is having our hearts open to cultivate community. To build a foundation on our own selfishness, our wants and needs is like building on sand. To build a strong foundation means that we look beyond ourselves and ask “what is good for all of us together?”

 Individual friendships and family relationships are an important part of our foundation, but they are not enough. To be connected to a community also helps give stability to our foundation in the storms of life.

 The image of an Amish community building a barn is a great example. No one ever does this on their own. They all pitch in and help and have something far more than one of them could achieve on their own.

 When we are willing to look beyond ourselves and cultivate community, everyone’s foundation is strengthened. It means that we participate in activities and events that are for the common good. We support and care about the wellbeing of those of all ages. We don’t turn down the opportunity to have a senior center because we won’t benefit from it. We don’t vote against the schools because we don’t have children in the schools any more. We don’t criticize the SCAC because we don’t need to use it. We understand that we are stronger when we care about each other. We have a team mentality.

 We have to be intentional about participating in community, and of cultivating it. It’s not always easy. Communities are made up of a diverse group of people and they can be frustrating. Cultivating community can take longer than we hope. People are distracted and are shy to reach out and connect with others. Neighbors aren’t always friendly when we do try.

 Cultivating community is hard, and yet it is worth it. It makes us a team. We are stronger together than apart. Together we create a safety net for each other.

 We can’t solve the problems in our community or nation on our own. We can’t rely on paid or elected people to do that either. We are the ones who have the skills and resources to do so. But too often we are so stressed out, so tired, so isolated that we don’t even try.

 When we free our hands and open our hearts and intentionally cultivate connections in community, we build a strong foundation that can weather the storms of life, and we do it together.

 And finally, the third component is faith. To have a strong foundation that endures through life’s storms and into eternity means that we invest in our relationship with God. We spend regular time with God in prayer and worship and study. We give God our devotion trusting that when we do, that the Holy Spirit will guide us and help direct us to the things that truly matter in life, the things that last. Jesus says in Matthew 6, “Seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness and when you do, everything else will fall into place.”

 Faith is the feeling deep inside that God is working, even when you don’t have proof, even when life is hard…especially when life is hard. Our faith in Jesus assures us that our hands do not have to be filled with lots of rules. The foundation of our life is not built on doing everything perfectly. We can never be perfect according to the law. But now with Jesus, we are given the gift of salvation by grace through faith. And when your faith intersects with someone else’s faith in community, and together you share grace and are guided by the Holy Spirit, even the most challenging obstacle doesn’t seem so overwhelming.

 Our challenge today is to be like the wise man, to build a solid foundation for life by having our hands free to reach out in our relationships, our hearts open to cultivate community, and to keep God first by invest in our faith.