11-7/8-20 Greater Than: Investment > Quick Fix Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 7:24-27

God’s blessings don’t always come to us in the midst of calm; often they arrive in the midst of chaos. God’s mercies don’t always come through the celebrations in our lives; they can also arrive in the rain, the storms, the hardest nights. Yet through it all, God is greater than our struggles. God is greater than our hopes. God’s ways are greater than our ways.

As this week and next we reflect on how God is greater than, today we are also invited to a life that is greater than. A life that invests in God’s ways, chooses God’s ways, builds on God’s ways.

The ways of God have been laid out by Jesus through his Sermon on the Mount. Today’s passage brings that sermon to a conclusion, calling everyone who hears Jesus’ words to decide which way for them will be the greater path.

Hear now the parable of two builders, from Matthew 7:24-27. …

Are you a planner or a spur of the moment person?

Are you content to be at home or yearning to always be on the go?

Are you more energized in the morning or at night?

Are you a spender or a saver?

These questions, and more, I often ask of couples as we begin to plan their weddings. Their responses allow me a glimpse into their personalities. Their responses also allow me a glimpse into who or what they invest in. Those investment, or lack thereof, are often a good indicator how they will later navigate the storms of life.

After almost twenty years of marriage, Ken and I are still learning together how to navigate our finances. We are not big purchase impulse buyers; it’s the little things that add up quickly for us. While we have investments and we pay off our credit card bills each month, we love to eat out. That is our quick fix when we don’t want to cook. That is our entertainment and our dates.

Too many times through the years we have needed to use savings to pay for our eating habits.

Then earlier this year Ken participated in Financial Peace University. Sitting down and tracking our money habits has been an eye opener. COVID forced us to eat at home and stretch one carry-out meal into two. As we have better awareness of what we spend, we can now better plan for next year’s added expenses of a new driver in our house.

What do you invest in? What priorities are shown through your choices, whether financial, economical, relational, or spiritual?

Every day we are faced with many choices.

Choices on how to spend or save our money.

Choices on how to use our time and energy.

Choices on how to invest in or ignore our relationships with others.

Choices on how to honor God.

Which of our choices are the quick fix for the moment, and which of our choices are an investment for the future? Which of our choices show a firm foundation, and which of our choices show a foundation built on shifting sand?

I’ve always loved the image of our Scripture passage today.

Two different foundations. Two different houses. Two different builders.

Which one will we be?

Imagine you were to build a new home—upon what type of foundation would you build?

Would any of us really build on sand, or would we all want to build on rock? At first glance, this question has an obvious answer. You would want to build your house on rock. Rock is firm. Rock is long lasting. Yet building on rock also costs more. Building on rock takes longer. Sand can be leveled and built on quicker. Cheaper. Faster.

.. In 1174 the Italian architect Bonnano Pisano began work on what would become his most famous project: A separately standing bell tower for the Cathedral of the city of Pisa. The tower was to be eight-stories and 185-feet-tall.

There was just one "little" problem: builders quickly discovered that the soil was much softer than they had anticipated, and the foundation was far too shallow to adequately hold the structure!

Do you know that the name “pisa” means “marshy land” and that the foundation is only 10 feet deep? Sure enough, before the building could be completed the whole structure had begun to tilt... and it continued to tilt... until finally the architect and the builders realized that nothing could be done to make the Leaning Tower of Pisa straight again. It took 176 years to build the Tower of Pisa and the tower has stood for over 800 years, but it has leaned as much as 18 feet away from where it should be.

Throughout the 1990s the Leaning Tower of Pisa was closed to the public for a 25-million-dollar renovation project because experts all feared that the tower would soon fall. They removed 110 tons of dirt, and reduced its famous lean by about sixteen inches. All of this was done not because of bad design or poor workmanship but because it wasn’t built on the right foundation.

--combined from sermonillustrations.com,

Alan Perkins “The Wise and Foolish Builders” 5-02 sermoncentral.com

Roddy Chestnut “The House on the Rock” sermoncentral.com

Sometimes in our lives we don’t even realize we are building on sand. We work hard to build a good career or a good marriage. We feel a sense of accomplishment when we can purchase a new home or a new car. We give to charity, volunteer in our community, worship regularly with our local congregation. We have a good time and a good life.

Yet, all of these can be gone in an instant. Our relationships. Our possessions. Our careers. Our finances. Then what? Then what is left in life except shifting sand, unless we have a firm foundation of faith?

When Hurricane Andrew hit Florida in the early 1990s, it was a category 5 hurricane that devastated many communities.

…One distraught home owner pointed a finger, not at Hurricane Andrew, but at inferior materials and cheap, careless, shoddy construction. He complained, "You can see it now, sheets of plywood with nails that missed the trusses, complete sections of roof trusses lying on the ground. They should never come loose if they are attached properly, but they weren't and we didn't know it, because it didn't show...until the storm came."

--Benjamin Reaves csec.org 1-3-93 “Building a Life”

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is calling his followers to build a strong foundation of faith before the storms of life test that foundation. Notice Jesus does not say if the storms come, but when.

All of us have been tested by the storms of 2020, in many different ways. Has this year exposed your foundation as one built on sand or built on rock? If you found yourself suddenly shifted by sand beneath your feet, do you hear Jesus’ call today to rebuild upon the rock, upon the firm foundation of faith in God and God’s ways?

Jesus is very clear in the Gospel of Matthew what that firm foundation looks like. It is a foundation grounded in both belief and behavior.

Today’s passage is found at the end of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in which he lays out the ways of God for God’s followers, practical ways to live daily as disciples of Jesus. Jesus offered blessings through the Beatitudes and taught us how to pray through the Lord’s Prayer. He called his followers to love their enemies and care for the needy and not judge one another.

He warned against being anxious and seeking hope in the treasures of this world. He called the people of God to be salt and light to the world, living examples of the ways of God.

In conclusion, Jesus called the people of God to practice what he preached. To listen and act upon what they have seen and heard from Jesus. To live their belief through their behavior. To build upon the firm foundation of God’s ways, not selfish desires or the ways of the world around us.

Just prior to today’s parable, Jesus shocked his first hearers by declaring that not all who call him Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven; only those who do what he says will be welcomed.

Later in the New Testament James echoes Jesus’ call by reminding us that faith without works is dead. We are called to “be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (James 1:22 NRSV)

To be a follower of Jesus is to listen and then act upon what we hear. To put into practice God’s kin-dom ways in our lives, our church and our ministry. To invest in a firm faith foundation built on rock rather than live by the quick fix of shifting sand.

Jesus declared:

“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 a life on.

If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a [foolish] carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.”

-MSG

The difference between these two builders is not in their knowledge.

The difference between these two builders is what they do with what they know.

Do they put Jesus’ words into practice? Do they love God and neighbor? Do they integrate faith into every living?

Today, we are invited by Jesus to build a firm foundation: to trust in God, believe in Jesus, and commit to live by God’s ways in our world.

The good news of the Gospel is that God is with us, offering us love and compassion, guidance and grace. We can trust in God’s promises and God’s presence through the storms and celebrations of life.

When we trust in God, we can believe in Jesus. That Jesus is God’s Son and our Savior. That Jesus came to earth to show us how to live by God’s ways as well as offer us the gift of our salvation.

When we believe in Jesus, then we are called to commit to following Jesus, to live by God’s ways as our ways.

Living by faith is not a quick fix in our lives. It’s not a magical formula that will suddenly transform everything around us. It’s not an option we choose only when we feel like it or have the time.

No, living by faith is an investment, a commitment, a priority, a way of life. Living by faith is building up a foundation brick by brick, day by day, choice by choice, intentionally following Jesus.

Living by faith right now may look like making time to worship together in person or online as a family. Living by faith right now may look like loving those with whom we disagree politically.

Living by faith right now may look like intentional and creative ways to serve and share, to love and care. Living by faith right now may look like deciding to invest financially in ministry over enjoying the quick fix of a latte each day.

The longer we journey with Jesus, the more we understand God’s ways. The closer we grow to Jesus, the firmer our foundation will be. The more we live for Jesus, the less intimidating it becomes to intentionally love God and love neighbor.

This week, I invite you to review your daily choices--

are you building on solid rock or shifting sand?

are you investing in the long run or spending money on a quick fix?

are you living by commitment or impulse?

are you sharing with others the generous love God has shared with you?

Earlier I mentioned the devastation from Hurricane Andrew, which revealed the shoddy construction of so many homes. Yet in a few neighborhoods, there were houses that survived.

These houses were built by the faithful volunteers from Habitat for Humanity. Habitat doesn’t cut corners, and due to the skills of their volunteers, most likely had more nails than needed in the studs. Because of the time and care and quality of their construction, the Habitat homes were left standing when the storm of the century blew through town. Even the storm could not shake what faith had made.

Hear the good news in today’s passage—

God is greater than the storms and struggles of our lives.

God is greater than anything that threatens to divide us.

God will assist us in weathering the storms of our lives.

Will we invest in building up a firm foundation of faith? Will we invest in behaviors grounded in faith? Will we invest in mission and ministry that shares God’s grace with others? Will we invest in faith in Jesus?

On Christ the solid rock we stand,

all other ground is sinking sand.

All other ground is sinking sand.

Amen.