

THE 567TH MOST POPULAR BABY NAME IN 1888

Matthew 7:21-29

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on June 1, 2008, 2008, Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.”

‘Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!’

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

The 567TH Most Popular Baby Name In 1888

This may be the oddest sermon title you have ever seen, at least from me, as I do not consider myself one given to eye-popping sermon titles.

This title is ironic, because the name in question *peaked* in popularity in 1888, at number 567. Not exactly “gold medal” status. By 1948 this name had altogether dropped off the list of popular baby names compiled by the Social Security Administration.¹

The name is “Prudence.” Number 567 in 1888. Rarely to be found in the last sixty years. Why would this name be so rare?

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The name is rare partially because, as Americans, we are high-living, risk-taking, fun-loving people.

- Our ancestors “sailed the ocean-blue” to arrive here.
- We settled the West within a century or two.
- We went to war “to end all wars.”²
- And we placed a man on the moon within a decade of a young, Camelot-like President challenging us with that noble goal.³

¹ Thanks to Rick Spaulding’s paper on this passage from *The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar*, January 2008, for this insight into the popularity of the name Prudence.

² This phrase is attributed to President Woodrow Wilson in reference to World War I. See <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1108.html>.

³ President John F. Kennedy issued this challenge May 25, 1961; it was accomplished on July 20, 1969. See <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/TECH/space/05/25/kennedy.moon/>.

In our economic life, our foreign policy, our national character, we are sometimes anything but prudent. We think we can “have it all.” And often we can.

Given this expansiveness of our national experience, it stands to reason that we don’t often name our daughters Prudence. It reminds us of limits, and we don’t entertain many.

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A deeper reason the name may be so low on the list is that we associate prudence with inaction. The person who is prudent doesn’t spend any more money than she has to, doesn’t take bold and risky action, only invests in instruments that are federally insured. Prudence is the one-talent man in the Parable of the Talents,⁴ who remains impervious to Jesus’ criticism for not investing his talent and returning it with interest.

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In reality, there is a type of prudence that is active and courageous, a prudence that in the long run serves us well because it allows us to create something that lasts.

This prudence lifts her head from the four-verse parable at the heart of our scripture lesson today.

‘Everyone...who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

Prudence. Prudence.

[By contrast,] everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!’

The truth is it takes a lot more energy to build a house on rock than it does to build a house on sand.

- A lot more time
- A lot more forethought
- A lot more effort
- A lot more money
- A lot more discipline
- A lot more stamina
- And therefore...a lot more courage.

Anyone can build a house that will fall down with the first wind or rain. But to build a house that withstands the storms of time and nature takes a lot more effort. Nobody can do it by looking at next quarter’s earnings projections, next month’s profit and loss statement, next week’s stock price, today’s tracking poll. It takes courage to go slow and get it right...It takes...prudence. Contrary to its image, prudence is often the bold and courageous thing to do.

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As we become familiar with Jesus’ parables, some of them shock us with surprise endings:

- A hated Samaritan turns out to be good⁵
- Workers hired at the end of the day receive as much as those hired early⁶
- A prodigal is welcomed home with music and dancing and his hard-working older brother is left having to decide whether or not to join the party.⁷

⁴ Matthew 25:14-30.

⁵ Luke 10:25-37.

⁶ Matthew 20:1-16.

⁷ Luke 15:11-32.

These parables draw us into their narrative, shock us with their surprise ending, challenge our established values.

By contrast, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders does not surprise us with its outcome. We expect a storm to fell a house built on sand and not to fell a house built on rock. But the parable does challenge our tendency to want to “have it all” without investing the time and effort and energy that “having it all” entails. In a holy way, this holy parable from Jesus challenges our reticence toward Prudence, our discounting of this cardinal virtue.

Let me try to be specific and practical:

- If we are raising a family, we had best take the prudent course from Day 1 of investing time and energy and affection and discipline in our parenting or we will be expecting our children to learn to walk on sand in which they can never get footing.
- If we are in the early stages of a relationship of any kind and are about to make a life-long commitment, we had best take the prudent course of investing time, energy, affection, understanding, communication, and even confrontation in our relationship, lest upon the first howl of wind, shingles blow and leaks sprout.
- If we are in the early stages of a major decision – college, career, graduate school, marriage, adoption, divorce, retirement, move – we had best take the prudent course of investing time and energy, wisdom and prayer, information, information, information, so that the decision we make will be on solid rock.
- As we envision our future as a congregation, as we chart broad directions and lay specific plans for our ministries, we had best take the prudent course of investing time and energy, prayers and spiritual discernment, information and faith so that we don’t build something that lasts no longer than a sandcastle on the beach.

Wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay:

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!⁸

It takes courage to build a house on rock. It may be ugly, but it will stand!

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The prudence presented in this parable involves more than solid planning and Herculean effort. It is also involves quality of materials used in building.

Last week, Maggie and I went to the Carter Barron Theatre in Rock Creek Park to see Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Early in the play, as the ear is just adjusting Shakespeare, Polonius bursts into some of the most familiar lines of the play, lines which have come down through history as wisdom teaching.

...Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.

...Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,
Bear’t that the’ opposed may beware of thee.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be...

...to thine own self be true...⁹

These wise and familiar sayings served as a solid foundation on which we could comprehend the remainder of the play. They were high quality building materials.

⁸ Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Figs from Thistles,” in *Collected Lyrics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), 127; quoted by Spaulding.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, I, iii, 55-81.

Likewise, when Jesus speaks of building a house on solid rock, he has particular building materials in mind: the religious wisdom contained in his teachings. “Everyone ...who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on solid rock.”

This parable closes the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is the best compendium of religious wisdom Jesus offers, some original with him, some hewn and quarried in Judaism, some found in other religions of the world as well.

To conclude this sermon, I invite you to sit back and take in a few of the high quality bricks and rich mortar of the Sermon on the Mount. Consider how you might use these materials to build your faith or your family or your work or our church or our nation. Receive now hewn and quarried religious wisdom of Jesus Christ:

- When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.¹⁰
- Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.¹¹
- Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.¹²
- Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.¹³
- Judge not, that you be not judged.¹⁴
- Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.¹⁵ Enter through the narrow gate.

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Good people of Westminster,
Prudence is a precocious baby,
More active than her name implies.

She will grow up to build her life
On the wise religious teachings offered by Christ,
Teachings that lead her name to be associated
Not with timidity,
But with wise and thorough action.
She will have the courage to get things right.

Her name is not much in vogue these days,
Hardly anyone wants to take her in.

But she’s up for adoption.....

¹⁰ Matthew 5:23-24.

¹¹ Matthew 5:37.

¹² Matthew 6:19-20.

¹³ Matthew 6:34 RSV.

¹⁴ Matthew 7:1 RSV.

¹⁵ Matthew 7:13-14.