

House on the Rock

Matt 7:24:-27

11/5/2017

*'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!'*

In our 21st century modern western culture, Jesus of Nazareth is still very much at the center of people's attention. Whether you are religious, or not religious, if you're irreligious or anti-religious. People still know Jesus of Nazareth is somebody that you have to at least recognize and have some category for in your mind.

I mean, come on, how many other ancient teachers from 2,000 years ago do you know of that we are still quoting their lines today. The list is extremely small, and Jesus is at the top.

Jesus was known as a profound teacher and in the two verses that immediately follow our reading for today proclaim him as such. Those verses tell us that the crowd who was listening to him was astounded by his teaching, for he taught as one having authority. Specifically he was known as a really good communicator. And foremost among his teaching styles was the form of these short fictional stories that he would tell. Parables like ours today that have a way of sticking in your mind...and in your heart.

So much so that you'll find yourself thinking about them two days later after you heard one. Or you'll wake you up in the night bothering you about the decisions that you made the previous day.

There meaning, these stories, are almost never actually straightforward, or at bare minimum demand something of us that we are sometimes unable or unwilling to do.

Which is really fascinating to me, there is a big part of our culture that values being concise, and clear, and to the point...and Jesus wasn't, almost never, any of those things. Often Jesus' teaching seem more like little riddles, asking what is going on in this story, and why am I being told this story in the first place. Or at least leaving us with something deeper to consider.

Yet, I think that if we listen closely or think about these stories beyond the sometimes moralistic tale approach, they will act the opposite of a moral tale because instead they ask us to do the work of listening and thinking deeply.

This fact has hit very close to home, as I've been walking around with this section of Matthew with me in my back pocket these past couple of weeks, pondering what it is that the rock in the passage represents. And while I was pondering it, I realized that something that hit very close to home for me...

Listening is one of the most difficult things that you and I do in a day.

Anybody?

Here's how that's true for me.

I am married to one of the most wonderful life partners in the world. She is an amazing woman, who does so much for me, and our family that I can honestly say that I am blessed. And yet...we have 3 roommates we live with...they are 6, 3, and ½ years old. Some of you have met them, they are incredible.

They are incredibly... energetic...rambunctious. And their behavior, on any given day...well here's the thing...When we had just one, in those first few weeks especially it was exhausting, it was so demanding to live with that newborn baby...in terms of sleep deprivation. You had to do everything...for them. But emotionally they are just pretty simple little creatures. They want to cry, eat, poop...that kind of thing. They are not that complex.

And then on the opposite hand now that we have 3 (who mostly sleep through the night) they are not so physically demanding. But 3 is so much more emotionally complex.

Anyways...so here's my point.

This is a very demanding season of parenting for both Julia and I, and maybe it's just us, but pretty much everyone else I've ever met with kids our age have felt the same way.

It's full, mostly good full, but full season...and it takes its toll. The biggest toll that it seems to take is on my ability to listen to my wife. Sometimes her ability to listen to me, but if I'm being honest, and I'm trying to be...it's mostly a big toll on my ability to listen. It's a daily occurrence.

Let me paint you the picture... I'm managing some phase of the day, like the post dinner, get ready for bedtime, bath, pajamas...that whole process. So I'm managing the 3 year old changing his diaper, trying to get him to put his legs into separate sides of his pajamas while also trying to answer some philosophical question from our 6 year old about something like...I kid you not... why do birds exist? Or quizzing her on her spelling words.

And then my beautiful wife Julia comes into me, and wants to talk to me about some important aspect of her life, a meaningful conversation she had today, or a detail about our day tomorrow that desperately needs me to remember it, or something adorable the baby has just done...really, actually, she is just trying to talk to me.

And what am I not doing? As I simultaneously managing this and this...I'm looking at her...and most of the time I'll even be giving her some physical non-verbal communication...like nodding...uh huh...like I'm trying to do...but what am I not doing?

I'm not listening. I'm not listening. This happens everyday. And she'll get all the way through trying to tell me something...2 or 3 minutes in sometimes...and I have a choice. I can just let the show go on...as if I'm listening...but then I get into hot water... Cause usually I have to end up saying something like ...Oh sure...or something...Yes, dear...you know?

And then it's like did I just agree to something?? I'm not really sure what she just said...you know...What am I supposed to do now?

Obviously the high road in that moment is to just own it. To just admit that I'm sorry, that I'm just over stimulated, and I was just not listening. I tried to make it seem like I was listening, but I'm not listening.

Anybody?

Some of you are most often on the receiving end of this, and almost all of us have been at some point...when you're trying to share something with someone and you realize...that they are not listening.

Either because they are distracted. Or because hearing me isn't their priority (they have some other thing they are trying to concentrate on). Or that what they are thinking ahead, while they should be listening, instead formulating their own response to what they think you are saying.

Are you with me?

So here is the basic principle, and we all experience it in different ways. Listening to other people, really hearing them... other people, is one of the most difficult things you and I do in a day.

And Jesus knows this. He knows this.

He knows, and because of what Jesus was trying to communicate was so out of anybody's categories in the first place. He knew that people had a very difficult time actually hearing him.

In the first century, when this was originally happening, and in the twenty-first century today it is very difficult to (especially if you are very familiar with the stories and the teachings of Jesus) to really listen. It is truly very difficult to truly hear him.

And yet, he spent his time giving us parables like this one, which stress that we must not just be about hearing something, but getting something done.

Because let's face it, the human condition makes us lazy listeners, and Jesus, the genius that he is, gives us this little fictional story to make us do the work to figure out what he means by all of the preceding teachings that are contained in the sermon on the mount (the largest section of Jesus's teaching which precedes our text this morning).

He tells us that if we are to hear these words and act upon them, then we will be like the wise builder who built upon the rock. While if we don't hear these words and do not act upon them we will be like the foolish builder who built his house upon the sand.

Yet, here is the trick, Jesus doesn't specify the exact nature of this "particular way" we are to hear and act upon them. But intriguingly he uses our wise and foolish housebuilders to suggest that his instructions are less like heteronomous commands imposed upon us from the outside, and more like wisdom teachings that help clarify how the world inside us and around us is actually structured, appearances notwithstanding.

Jesus doesn't give us a neat little instruction booklet, with his 7 habits for highly effective Christians, he doesn't leave us with another list of things we should do in order to improve our life.

Instead, he offers a challenge of sorts, work to do. He draws us into think a little deeper. Parables, like our brief one on housebuilding, are actually invitations, to take in the teachings of Jesus, and to hammer away at them, to transform them, to put floors and walls to them, to construct a roof with them. Yet if we are foolish, we will do it looking for our own ways, drawing our own meanings out of them, not the teachings of Jesus.

For Jesus, the meaning of the realm of God is a radical mystery. Even as he tells people about it, it remains permanently intractable to all attempts to fully grasp it. Jesus did not view his teachings as a way to explain everything to our satisfaction, but rather to call into question our previous understandings.

In other words, Jesus is trying to get us to construct our own houses of understanding, rather than just moving into someone else's.

Jesus is actively popping every circuit breaker in our minds. After all the yammer and opinions about how God should or shouldn't run the world, he is getting us to just stop and stand there with our eyes open and our mouths shut to listen about the realm of God.

This is Jesus saying to us, the ball is in our court. And what we can get out of it, depends on what we bring into it.

What Jesus won't do is play into the role that people think he ought to play. He is constantly putting the ball into other people's court. He won't leave you alone. And he won't allow you to remain comfortable. He's going to force you to rethink how you think about yourself and the world and make you do the work.

Yet if we do that work...you can assure you are building upon the rock! Blessed are you because when the rains fall, the floods come, the winds blow, and beat upon your house shaking your world, if you have done the work of figuring out how to be a little Christ in the world, then your house will stand because you know who and what you are built upon.

We, as the church, must not be about just hearing the words of Jesus, but we must listen deeply to them so that we might act upon them, working to make a safe, strong, flourishing human communities founded on the rock, and thus well prepared to face the inevitable wind and rain.

It's like the teacher Oliver Wendell Holmes is supposed to have said, "Most people are willing to take the Sermon on the Mount as a flag to sail under, but few will use it for the rudder by which to steer."

Given Jesus' precondition that person's resolve their differences prior to worship, his counsel to pluck out one's lustful eye, and his admonishment to turn the other cheek, one understands why people might claim great things for the sermon on the mount without attending to its particulars. And in a consumeristic society such as our own, Jesus' exhortation to seek the realm of God without anxiety for our material needs seems just plain naive.

Whatever our reservations, Matthew insists that this is all about more than just hearing the words of Jesus, but hearing and acting upon them. Doing the very work of making possible a safe, strong, flourishing human community.

Building a house is like building a life. These builders correspond to us, their houses to the lives we construct. One builder is wise, the other is foolish. The key to this system is a lot like the key to listening to your wife...you better not skip out on it, despite the great chaos of life, you better find a way to do it.

In other words, a particular life of action is how Jesus is actually and concretely known, interpreted, encountered, companioned, followed: not merely by thinking or talking in a particular way, but by acting and living into the realm of God.