

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany  
February 23, 2020

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**Deuteronomy 11:18-21**  
**Matthew 7:21-27**

### **Sand Castles, Stone Castles and the Things that Last**

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise person who built their house on rock. – Matthew 7:24*



Ruins of Dunnottar Castle, Scotland, United Kingdom

Warren Salter’s house is sinking. Not long after he bought his house in Havelock, North Carolina, he realized something was wrong.

“Everybody’s yard is dropping” he said, “What used to be flat land for the kids to play football is now a big sunken area. Trees planted five years ago ... [are] tilted downhill ... everything is sinking. “

The Salter’s house and all the houses in his neighborhood were built on a garbage dump, a landfill from the 1940’s. Today cavities, called “land voids,” are created by the decomposing garbage and are popping up everywhere.

Salter only had to dig in his yard a few inches to discover the problem. He found glass, beer cans, spark plugs, baby food jars, even the hood of an old truck. His neighbor, Shannon Richards’ house is settling – cracks appearing in the drywall, doors that won’t close anymore. The state Division of Waste Management soil analysis found unsafe levels of arsenic, antimony, cadmium (cad’-me-um) and lead.

For more than ten years the neighbors have been working with state and local officials to try and deal with the mess without much success. They’ve even reached out to environmental activist, Erin Brockovich, but they haven’t yet heard back. <sup>i</sup>

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, the most important sermon of all time, Jesus told a short story about two men who each built a house. One house survived a storm and one did not. The difference was not in the builders, and not in the materials they used. The difference was the foundation, the ground on which they were built. Listen to Jesus from Matthew, chapter 7 beginning at verse 21:

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the 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 person who built their 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!”*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

We had an interesting discussion in Bible Study on Wednesday about whether this is “Works Righteousness.” Is Jesus saying we earn our place in his kingdom based on what we do? Clearly he cares about what we do, but he’s not saying that. When you read this in the larger context, it’s clear that he’s talking about false Christians, those who call him “Lord and Savior” then build their lives on other values, not his.

He’s talking about “Christians” who glorify and enrich themselves, preachers with mansions and private jets for sure, but also regular people who say we believe and claim we want to follow Christ, then drink the cool-aid of the consumer culture, paying Jesus only lip service, trusting in their own accomplishments and achievements.

He says:

*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.*



I preached this passage when I was serving in Florida and someone came up afterwards and said, “You do know that all of us here have houses built on sand.”

Of course. Who doesn’t love building sand castles? Here’s one of the winners from Sandfest in Ocean City. Look at the windows. Is it a church? Artists who carve these magnificent castles in the sand and the children who build their own with buckets and shovels know that what they are building is temporary. In the words of the prophet, Stevie Wonder:

“The time comes when you stop pretending  
For all dreams must come to an ending  
Remember what happens to castles of sand.”<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus makes it a metaphor about life and lifestyle.

*The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew ... and it fell—the house build on sand fell -- and great was its fall!*

There is a truth about building on sand or building on garbage. Whatever you put there will not last long.

Instead of sand castles our ancestors built stone castles. The one on the cover of your bulletin is Dunnottar (Dunn-ah-tar) Castle, a medieval fortress on the northeast coast of Scotland. William Wallace defended Scotland from Dunnottar in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the Scottish crown jewels were hidden there when Cromwell’s armies invaded in 1651. The structure also played a strategic role in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jacobite rebellion.



But here’s the thing. Although Dunnottar survived for centuries, it is now a ruin. Like the Roman Colosseum, Herod’s Temple, Machu Picchu, and everything else built by human hands, Dunnottar eventually crumbled. Nothing lasts forever.

Nothing, that is, except for the word of God. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

*The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.* <sup>iii</sup>

Jesus told his disciples:

*Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away.<sup>iv</sup> Whoever hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise person who built their house on rock.*

Jesus not only wants us to build our houses on solid ground, he wants us to ground our lives in the foundation of his word.

Most of us want that too, but we get caught up with the values of the world around us. There’s a lot of pressure to build our lives on other things. Some days we feel like we don’t have the strength to say “No!” to sports culture, a workaholic lifestyle, crazy consumerism, and everything else that weighs us down and steals our joy. Our temptation is to say to him, “Lord, Lord,” then pursue everything but him.

For a lot of us family is the foundation of our lives – we build our lives around those we love and particularly our children and grandchildren. But kids grow up; they move away. I’m saying this to you as the most obnoxious grandmother here—my grandchildren are perfect! Family should be a key value in all our lives, but family should never take the place of Jesus Christ. As 15-year old Ireland told us last Sunday, “Jesus is first, others are second and I’m third.” Parents listen, building our lives on our children is not a kind thing to do to them. Instead, we need to show them what it looks like to build a life of love with Jesus Christ at the center.

That’s a life that’s built to last. Sand castles wash away; even stone fortresses decay and fall, but a life built on a strong foundation of the worship and service to Jesus Christ will last forever. He wants to be our solid rock and our safe harbor.

For years I had the privilege of knowing Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity. After the Category-5 Hurricane Andrew devastated south Florida, Millard visited Homestead, the epicenter of Andrew’s fury. He saw neighborhoods, one after the next that had been destroyed, reduced to sticks on the ground – except, and this was remarkable, except for the Habitat for Humanity houses -- which still stood, practically unharmed.

Someone asked Millard what he thought happened in Homestead. Was it a Passover... a miracle like in Exodus where God spared the faithful? Millard laughed and said:

“Well, maybe, but more likely the reason those houses are still standing is the way they were built -- on the foundation of Christ’s love. When the volunteers were told to put two nails in a board, they put in 10; when they laid shingles they used 5 nails instead of 2. Those roofs are on there, tight, and forever.”

*Then the rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the houses, but they did not fall*

...because they were built with love by volunteers who heard Jesus’ words and acted on them.

Then Millard smiled and said, “Now, if a giant magnet had passed over those houses, we’d have been in a lot of trouble!”

Jesus’ story of the two builders is just as important today as it was 2000 years ago. It’s about you and me! Don’t take any shortcuts in building your life. Make him your foundation, the ground on which everything else safely stands. Everything else you do, all that you build will eventually crumble, but lives built on the strong foundation of service to Christ in his love -- those are the things that last.

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<sup>i</sup> Daniel Bean, “House Built on North Carolina Landfill Has Sinking Feeling” ABC News, May 29, 2013

<sup>ii</sup> Stevie Wonder, “Castles in the Sand” Tamla, 1964

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 40:8

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 24:35