

Foundations Matter

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Text: I Kings 19:1-12; Matthew 7:21-29

Although Fathers and Fathers' Day are not the focus of today's message, I want to put in a good word for Dads, for I was one of those people fortunate enough to have a Father and a Mother who had high expectations of me but who were also patient and generous in providing *foundations* – compassion, courage, faith, good stories and great memories - upon which I built my life. And we all know that whether you're building a towering structure of glass and steel, a bridge, a university, a relationship, a family, a church, or a meaningful and productive life, it's imperative that before anything else you secure the foundations.

Which is why we have given Bibles to some of our children today and why some of our young people have been in classes to learn about the church and about faith and God. Both of these celebrations are essentially about trying to lay strong and stable foundations.

Which is precisely the point of the parable with which Jesus concludes his famous *Sermon on the Mount*.

Having instructed his disciples on how to be faithful in a world in which truth and goodness are so often crucified and how to survive the inevitable storms and struggles that come knocking at everyone's door, Jesus said:

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.

You want to secure your foundations? Well then, according to Jesus, you must first of all listen to what he has to say - to the promises you can claim and the hope you cannot do without - and then do something with what you've heard. "*Be hearers and doers of the word.*"

That, by the way, is the same essential lesson Jesus' forefathers and mothers learned during those long, awkward and often perilous years in the wilderness en route to the Promised Land. They spent all that time – give or take forty years – in order to learn this one essential lesson: *You shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.* You need bread, of course. You need bread and a few other essentials like water, shelter, clothing, medicine, tools, beauty, friendship, family, language, laughter and love.

But you don't need the newest men's fragrance from Armani, or an iPhone 4, or a Gucci purse. You need bread and certain other essentials. But when things become difficult for you, when someone betrays you; or you get the call from one of the kids that there's been an accident; or the company closes, eliminating 1000 jobs; or when your pastor lay for days in a coma— then you realize that not even bread is enough. You need bread but also the *Word of a God* who promises to be with you, to suffer with you and to struggle constantly and forever in order to re-create and help make all things new.

That's the promise of our faith. It's not that we will be immune from wilderness or crucifixion. That's not the promise. The promise is that we don't have to face even the worst on our own.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble

. . . is a promise.

They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

. . . is a promise.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. . .

. . . is a promise.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That, too, is a promise . . . a place to stand in the midst of a storm; a firm foundation for any life; one that has been carefully tested in the laboratory of human experience and found to be solid and reliable. So *be still and listen to God* who speaks fresh words every day, through dreams and beauty; friendship and forgiveness; old loves and new beginnings; in sorrow, songbirds and stars in the night. So listen, says Jesus. Be alert for the universe-making, bone-melting whispered word of God that grounds, comforts and confronts us, according to our need.

Which leads me to this second point: *listen to the silence*. For if you would send your foundations deep, deeper still, you must have margins of time – Sabbath and silence - in which to disengage from others in order to still the outer demands and the inner clamor that give no peace.

Some of you will recall the famous story of the prophet Elijah who, feeling depressed, discouraged, frightened, betrayed and sorry for himself, the way you and I are likely to feel when our best efforts are not appreciated or when our lives or the lives of those we love are threatened, fled to Mt. Horeb where he hid in a cave, all alone, waiting and

listening .

And the Bible says there came a great wind, splitting mountains and breaking rocks, but God was not in the wind. Then came an earthquake and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the earthquake or the fire. No, God was in the silence that followed. It was in the silence that God spoke to the waiting, listening, and frightened prophet. It was in the silence.

Do you want to know God better? Do you want to hear what God has to say? Then you need to listen in the silence. Which is such a rare and precious thing in our world today. Even in church where we ought to know better, silence is an endangered commodity.

That was one of the things that jarred us after we retired and went visiting churches. Having worked over the years to teach our congregations to value silence as an act of worship, Bobbie and I were stunned to discover that silence was not only missing in most of the churches we attended, it was devalued. To tell the truth some churches were so noisy and the people so rude that we almost walked out. In fact one Sunday when Bobbie wasn't there to keep me in line I did walk out because I couldn't handle the noise. I needed and expected some margins of silence with which to punctuate the music, the words, and the prayers.

How about you? Do you value silence? Do you take time to listen in and to the silence? If you do, you are something of a rarity in today's world, which as we all know is drowning in noise, the air dense with horns, sirens, and the hiss and rumble of city buses; cars with radios blaring and sub woofers shaking the pavement; people shouting into cell phones for all the world to hear; young and old alike with devices grafted to their ears, fingers texting and twittering away in an effort to fill the potentially empty minutes of the day.

Over coffee the other day a friend of mine referenced a recent article that suggested that more and more people in our culture are suffering from a syndrome called CPA, which stands for *Continuous Partial Attention*. Although a concept new to me, it turns out that there's a lot of literature on this. Unlike the simple multitasking most of us rely on to get through our days, in the case of *Continuous Partial Attention* we're motivated by a desire not only to get through the day but to operate at a high cognitive level on multiple fronts while constantly scanning for other people, activities, or opportunities that seem to be even more important. And so we write an email while participating in a conference call. Or carry on a conversation at dinner while texting under the table on our Blackberry.

Researchers allow as to how there are times when continuous partial attention may serve us well as a strategy. But continuous *Continuous Partial Attention* has a shadow side that endangers us, setting off a whole range of attention-related disorders and stress-related diseases.

One of those disorders is an inability to hear not just because our ears are damaged (which they probably are) but because our brains are working overtime in an effort either

to not miss a thing or to protect us from all the noise produced by the things we don't want to miss. In either case it's our ability to listen to and value silence that suffers. And without silence we cannot make sane choices.

People may sincerely hunger for God and for God's guidance and assurance, yet they often find themselves coming up short simply because they are unable to hear the One who no longer chooses to shout for our attention but who always and forever hovers near with love, whispering –*whispering, whispering* – in the silence.

Friends, if you would build your life upon a solid foundation, you must seek the silence of eternity, some time-out-of-time in which to listen, first of all, *to the Word and promises of God* and secondly *to the silence*.

And then, paradoxically, you need also to listen to others. *You need to listen to others*. For we need not only to be alone for the laying of our foundations, we need to be *alone - together*. We need to be in touch with helpful people, to be part of community, to learn from and be reinforced by others whose understanding and encouragement may rally our flagging spirit and revive our tired resolve – a spiritual friend, a teacher, mentor, sponsor, therapist, pastor, parent, or child even.

It's significant that according to the Bible one of the primary reasons Jesus chose disciples was simply *to be with him*. Not *to do* a lot of things but just *to be with him*.

Remembering that, the early church born at Pentecost gathered daily for prayer and communion so that individually they could be strong and stay faithful in the face of persecution.

And so our tradition. The genius of the Methodist movement in 18th century England lay in the small groups in which people from all walks of life gathered on a weekly basis with others who were concerned about the state of their soul and who would hold them accountable for moral growth and spiritual discipline.

We are no different today. Whether it's losing weight, battling an addiction, managing grief, or getting through chemotherapy, we need others who are truly concerned about us and who can and will speak a word of truth.

Who are those people for you?

Who holds you accountable for the way you use your time or your resources?

Who encourages you to remember the Sabbath, or to live a simpler life, or to turn off the computer or the phone or the game so as to have time for genuine conversation?

Who helps you recognize the difference between practicing meaningful friendship and the compulsive effort to accumulate a thousand and one so called "friends" on *Facebook*?

Who encourages you to tell and live the truth?

Who models for you patience, generosity, character and self-control?

Who teaches you the art of hospitality or forgiveness?

Who urges you to work for peace in a world of violence, abuse and betrayal, or to build bridges between the alienated – even within the church?

Who might actually help you listen *to the word of God and to the silence* without which you cannot make sane choices?

And having listened and learned, who will help you live it? Who will help you *do* what you hear and live what you love? To whom will you listen?

Your life and your soul depend upon your choices.

I close with this.

Do you remember in elementary school, when they gave you a little device with which to make a circle? The mysterious little device, called a compass, had a sharp point on one end and a little slot for a pencil on the other. When you put the sharp point somewhere on a piece of paper and rotated the arm with the pencil around it, it made a perfect circle every time.

Well, so it is with our soul. As one of the early saints put it: “If we get the center right, the circumference will take care of itself.”

Spiritual practices are about getting the center right, so that the “circumference” of our life has wholeness, balance, integrity, grace and stability.

And so Jesus’ words abide:

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.

Foundations Count!