

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 7:21-29

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“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of God 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.

My mom is a piano teacher. And, much to my brother and my’s chagrin, her piano studio has always been at home. When we were growing up, it was such an annoyance. From the time school let out at three o’clock in the afternoon until eight o’clock at night, we were plagued with the sounds of missed notes on scales and mistakes in songs. And what you probably wouldn’t realize, unless you were the kid of a music teacher is that, for the eighteen years I lived at home, I heard the same songs over and over again—the songs that were in the books Mom uses with most of her students. And, though the bench was occupied by different bodies, the mistakes were generally the same. To this day, I can barely tolerate traditional piano pieces like The Spinning Song, Fur Elise, or oh so culturally-sensitive Indian War Song.

Now you might think that as the child of a piano teacher who was exposed to so much piano music and who obviously isn’t the least bit shy of offering a critique of it, you might think that I am a talented pianist. After all, outside of the piano lessons, my mom practiced often, wonderful pieces of music that people were willing to pay to hear her play. Oh, her hands just glide over the keys—it’s as if she and the instrument are one. And when she plays songs for church, well, she’s like Marion. Their faith is expressed in those eighty-eight keys and most of us feel just a little bit closer to God when they hear them playing. And yet, when Mom practiced at home my brother and I asked her to close the door because the sound bothered us. We went so far as to ask her not to practice during our favorite TV shows. We were unappreciative brats, really.

And still you must be thinking, wow, Robin must be really good at playing the piano otherwise she wouldn’t be so quick to judge. But, you’d be incorrect. I am not a talent at the keyboard. I can play enough to figure out what a new hymn sounds like, but other than that, I didn’t pick much up from being exposed to it day and night. For you see, exposure wasn’t enough. I would have had to have practiced. And, much to my mother’s dismay, that was not something I was

inclined to do. I didn't make learning how to play the piano a priority—I was more interested in tap lessons and playing kick ball. Therefore, I never really became any good at it.

A good musician doesn't become good by listening alone. It takes practice and performing to really make it stick. And Jesus is saying the same about discipleship in this morning's scripture passage. In the passage, Jesus talks to the disciples and the crowds gathered around them. After giving the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns the people that just because they call him Lord and listen to his sermons, does not mean that they will be saved. Instead he declares, "only the one who does the will of God in heaven" will enter the kingdom of heaven.

One of the recurring themes in Matthew's Gospel is the need for action on behalf of God. It's not enough for the disciples to follow, listen, and believe. They must also DO. This has been a topic of much debate over the centuries of Christianity. Some theologians, academics who study the nature of God, believe that it is simply through the act of believing that we are saved—that we have eternal life with God. However, there are others, such as Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, who made the famous claim—"Faith Without Works is Dead."

As Jackie mentioned in her introductions to the scriptures, there are four gospels in the New Testament. Gospel simply means Good News and the Good News of Jesus Christ is told by four different people—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Some of the stories they tell are similar and can be found in more than one of the Gospels. And though the stories may be similar, each of the authors of the Gospels has a different emphasis in his writing. Matthew's interpretation is the Gospel with the strongest emphasis on the need to do God's will instead of just simply believing in Jesus.

And Matthew stays true to his emphasis in his interpretation of the parable of the house built on sand versus the house built on rock. He is quite clear on the matter. It is the one who DOES the will of God who has a place in heaven. Jesus illustrates his point with the familiar story about the house built on sand and the house built on rock. When I envision this passage, I picture folks literally building their homes on sand—like it's some kind of a beach side retreat. Obviously, the foundation of a house built on rock is much stronger than one built on sand.

Now it doesn't take a messiah to figure that one out. But, to really appreciate this illustration, we need an understanding of Middle Eastern geography. Throughout Palestine, the region in which Jesus ministered, there are places where nary a drop of rain falls throughout the spring and summer. These regions are known as wadis. They are wide, flat expanses that would appear to be fine places on which to build a foundation for a home. However, though they may be dry as a bone and a seemingly good place to build in the dry season, when the wet season comes in the fall, these wadis fill with rushing waters, they become river beds, and those rivers have the power to literally wash a home away. It must be like those pictures we sometimes see on the news in the spring when a farmhouse along the Mississippi is lifted off its foundation and we see it bobbing down the river in the rushing rapids. Thus the warning—build on rock, not sand.

But, if one is unfamiliar with these weather patterns of the Middle East, the dry wadi would be the most logical—not to mention easiest—place to build a home. After all, who wants to go to

the hassle of carving around rock to build a foundation? That must seem like a lot of nonsense when the ground around the rock is so nice and flat--such an easier base upon which to build a foundation. And I suppose that's really one of the points of this parable—the easiest option is not always—indeed is rarely—the best or most meaningful option.

And so the illustration tells us the following about Jesus' message—folks who just follow along and listen to him and say the right thing, such as when they address him in the beginning of the passage by saying “Lord, Lord” and yet don't do anything—they are like the folks who build their house on sand. Knowing what's going on and understanding the lingo—well, that's not going to get us anywhere in the end. What's important is if we're willing to do the things Jesus tells us that God wants us to do. We went over some of those last week—feed people, clothe people, forgive people—we know the list.

Now I'm guessing that we've all been struck by the hypocrisy of some folks who's actions during the week don't begin to mirror what they've professed in church on Sunday. Shoot, we've all probably been one of those people at some point in our lives. We knew how to talk the talk, but when it came time to be willing to walk the walk—well, we either lacked the courage, conviction, or we were just downright lazy and couldn't be bothered. Sort of like I was with piano lessons—would I like to be a piano virtuoso? Of course. Was I willing to do what it takes to be one? No. The same can be said for Christian discipleship—do all folks who go to church want to be good disciples and if Matthew's rendering of Jesus' lessons is true—be found worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven? Well yes, of course. But are all of them—indeed us—willing to make the effort? I'm not so sure. To know what to say and do and yet not to do them—that's like building in the wadi—it looks good for now, but will prove to be disastrous and pretty worthless in the end.

These pews and that comfy red chair I sit in back there—there's a temptation to make them our own personal wadis. When we're in them we might start thinking that we've got it made. We're hearing the scripture, we're singing the songs, we're saying hello to one another. And these things are of importance, but when it comes to Christian discipleship, the coming to church part is like the building in the wadi part. It's easy. And so is sitting back and critiquing the hundreds of piano students I have listened to over the years. And just as listening and critiquing haven't made me a fine pianist, so too listening and just being here doesn't make us fine disciples.

For Matthew's Jesus, it's the doing part that matters. It's taking the time to build on the rock—to have a firm foundation to hold you in place when the rushing river comes—that's what's important. And the building of that foundation comes from practicing our faith. Sunday morning worship is when we learn some of the how's and why's of the faith, but it's during the other six days of the week that the rubber hits the road. Again, just hearing isn't enough. Imagine how this morning's Old Testament reading about Noah would sound if Noah had just listened and not acted. What a depressing story—

And then the rains came, just as God had predicted. And Noah began to question his decision not to build that boat. But he thought, surely it's just a little storm. But as the days went on and the rains continued and the river began to swell over its banks, Noah started to get a little anxious. He sent his sons out to gather wood so he could start building that boat like God had

said. But by then his yard was flooded and he and Mrs. Noah were living on the second floor of their home and there was no dry land on which to build a boat . . . And well, you can imagine how different the ending would be if Noah had listened but not acted. He was, quite literally, saved because he listened to God.

And Matthew says the same for us. Our salvation will come by virtue of us doing God's will in this world—feeding people, clothing people, forgiving people, bring freedom to people—again, we know the list. But knowing isn't enough. It's the doing that matters.

Now, I hesitate to tell this story as it can be a sticky-wicket to highlight a congregation member in a sermon. But I feel compelled and so I'm going to tell it. Last year I met someone in the public speaking group Toastmasters who I really wanted to get to know better. She and I had coffee and I remember her telling me about how much she enjoyed her job. She was especially proud of the company for which she worked. She told me about how each employee was a valuable person to the company's owner. She felt like each person was respected and treated with dignity. Her high praise for her employer really stuck with me. I'm not accustomed to people talking like that about their bosses. Then, when I started looking into this position and mentioned it to my new friend, she told me that her boss goes to church here. Well, come to find out her boss is Dave Mathia, owner of DSI who just won the Grand Traverse Region Chamber of Commerce Small Business Owner of the Year Award. Obviously, the care and respect he shows his workers is recognized in his field. Dave doesn't just come here on Sunday morning and that's the end of his discipleship for the week. He lives the other six days of the week what he learns here on Sundays. He is a fine example for us all.