

“Building on Solid Rock”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger | February 5, 2023
Edina Morningside and Linden Hills UCC

Matthew 7:1-12, 24-27

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

...“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!”

I remember one moment years ago here, when work was being done in 2018 to change the old narthex (wood paneling, no light, red carpet, and close quarters) into the well-lit, spacious, hospitable Gathering Space we have now. There was a very thick wall in the middle of that room, holding up the building’s weight. To remove the wall, we had to put a steel beam overhead to carry the weight, and connect it to other steel passing through the floor and walls downstairs. Below us, in the preschool classroom and nursery area, they jackhammered wide holes, and then dug by hand several feet down to the bedrock. (This was when one of our now-members came to worship for the first time, moving slowly with a cane past big open holes in the floor and up dusty stairwells, just trying to find the sanctuary through the plastic drapes.) It was quite a disruptive process, removing walls and going through floors, but they needed the strongest footings possible for the weight of this building, and only bedrock would do.

Jesus finishes out the Sermon on the Mount today with a building metaphor which recalled for me that experience from some years ago. He suggests that there are at least two choices in how to live. Individuals, communities, and societies can live either in houses built on sand, or in homes established on bedrock. As we gather in worship, then discern and vote on whether to merge our congregations, Jesus gives us these two possibilities for our future together.

To live in a house built on sand is to live, he says, according to judgment, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. Making judgments by itself is simply a product of human experiences, and how we exist. “Most human brains are wired to put all the stimuli we receive into categories. It helps us process the overwhelming input we get. [We make snap judgments about things, and about people too.] The problem comes when we judge people based on size, race, gender, clothing, age, or behavior that we may not understand. In those cases, we are judging people not on their value as human beings, but on our own biases against people with similar sizes, races, genders, etc. We fail to see the person and instead only see the label we’ve placed on the person.”¹ We live in an age where such judgments are immediate and

¹ Dr. Kimberly Leetch, “Preaching Themes” in *Narrative Lectionary Worship Resources* (© 2022 Clergy Stuff™, ClergyStuff.com).

everywhere. Social media encourages hot takes and snap critique. Offline too, we judge not only the actions of others but their identities as well. This is a risk we run when our congregations speak in terms of “us” and “them”, or when we act on presumptions about places like Linden Hills and Edina. Perhaps the most familiar forms of condemnation, though, are the ways we stand in judgment over ourselves. Either thinking too lowly of ourselves or too lowly of others leads to a joyless life under the roof of perpetual critique and condemnation. Such a building has no foundation other than sand, Jesus says, so in the storms of life how great will be its fall! I should be careful talking about falling walls around here....

By contrast, living in an open-hearted way, without condemning judgment, is to build on bedrock. This stems from a reminder of reciprocity, or as Jesus says, “with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” The sort of energy we put out into the world is the energy we’ll receive back, and the field of energy within which we live. So if we live without judgment, our own failings will be received with mercy as well. We can live in communities that judge ourselves less harshly, and one another, and whoever we might be tempted to label “those people unlike us”. Setting aside judgment in our worshipping community might look like bearing with those who take longer in speaking announcements or offering prayers. It could mean celebrating attempts to do something new even when its imperfect, encouraging those who are risking vulnerability, or joining with new and longtime members in acts of love for God, neighbor, and self. This is to live according to the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule, when Jesus says “do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” Incidentally, the Golden Rule assumes that everyone wants to be treated the same way, so I’ve also heard of the Platinum Rule: treat others as *they* wish to be treated. Communities like this are not constructed on sand, or even concrete. This is what it’s like to inhabit a home built on bedrock itself.

Kristopher Phan Coffman, a seminary professor, caught my attention this week when he [pointed out](#) that this parable isn’t a Three Little Pigs story. The focus is not on the materials of construction, because it makes little difference whether the walls are made of straw, wood, or stone. If you don’t have a solid foundation to start from, none of what goes on it really matters. So what will be the foundation of this new congregation, assuming we agree to merge? Will we base the whole thing on money, or the judgments we’re tempted to make there? Is our firm foundation to be found in traditions, precedent, or the way things once were? No, for such things are like sand that washes away; they cannot long support a vibrant spiritual home. Even if we use the best of such resources and community gifts to frame up this new church, our bedrock must be the same strong foundation that Jesus had in mind: the love and faithfulness of a God who relates to us with mercy rather than judgment. A wise community that builds on solid rock anchors itself in the teachings of Scripture, in the guidance of God’s living Spirit, and in Jesus’ powerful life, death, and resurrection. This is our bedrock, trusting in God as a reliable parent who gives when asked, opens the door when knocked, and rewards those who search. With prayer, worship, music, service, generosity, and courage, we dance freely because we are held securely in God’s care.

Therefore, the spiritual home we inhabit together will love people for who they are, setting aside condemnation and corrosive judgment, praying to be forgiven as we forgive others. With a glad reciprocity that responds to God’s gift of every good thing, we will work to fulfill what our neighbor needs, in the hope and expectation that they’ll do the same for us. On such a solid foundation, the building can change (as our building has); the people who pass through it can change (as our community has); but the bedrock of God’s loving justice known in Jesus remains sure and stable. There will still be tough times to weather—even the house built on rock goes through storms. Yet the rains may fall, the floods may come, the winds may beat and blow on this house, but it will not fall if it is founded on the bedrock of God’s other-centered, generous love. Amen.