**The Sermon on the Mount**

**Sunday June 24, 2018**

**“Building on the Rock” (Matthew 7:13-29)**

**1. Introduction: *Classic Rock***

 My brother-in-law, Brad, is a real joker. Even though we don’t see eye to eye when it comes to politics, we do share a similar sense of humor and we both appreciate classic rock music. When I started as pastor here, he suggested, jokingly, that I preach a series of sermons featuring song titles from classic rock songs. On the top of his list of suggestions were “Highway to Hell” by ACDC and “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin. It’s a good thing that I haven’t taken up his suggestions. However, considering this morning’s gospel lesson, I could have entitled this morning’s sermon, “*Highway to Hell* and *Stairway to Heaven*.” After all, Jesus begins the concluding words of his great sermon with this challenge, “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hellis broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it.” (7:13-14).

 So, at the end of his great sermon, Jesus presents his audience with a clear choice to participate in God’s kingdom or not. His listeners have heard his challenge to seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, but first they must respond by entering through the gate and taking their first step on the road of discipleship. This final section is marked by vivid contrasts: a narrow gate and a wide gate; an easy road and a difficult road; a good tree and a rotten tree; a wise builder and a foolish builder; and a solid house and a flimsy house. These contrasting images communicate to the listener that the appropriate response to Jesus’ call is obedience, demonstrated by putting his teachings into practice. One commentator described this final section like this: “The entire section contrasts those who, on the one hand, not only hear Jesus’ words but put them into practice, with those who, on the other, fail to act on Jesus’ teaching and may even attempt to mask their failure by saying right words or by inauthentic action” (D. Senior, *Matthew,* p. 90).

**2. The Gate and the Road**

The first image in the finale of the sermon emphasizes two related and essential aspects of following Jesus – entering through the gate and walking down the road. This suggests that the Christian life has a beginning, that is, an entrance through a gate, as well as an ongoing journey down a particular road. Both of these images found throughout the New Testament as descriptions of the Christian life. For example, in John 10:9, Jesus declares, “*I am the gate*; *whoever enters through me will be saved*. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.” Later on in John’s Gospel, he comforts his disciples with these words, ““*I am the way*and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). In these passages Jesus is presenting himself as the entry point and the pathway for the Christian. He is the doorway and we must all make a choice, cross over that threshold and put our faith in Jesus. While this beginning step is important, the ongoing journey is equally important. For instance, the book of Acts calls Christians *those who belonged to the Way* (Acts 9:2), defining Jesus’ followers as people who were walking down a particular road. Walking on the Way entails faith in Jesus and obedience to his teachings. It means that Christian life is not merely expressed in our words, but also in our actions. We need to talk the talk and walk the walk.

 But Jesus cautions us that the road of discipleship is not an easy one. Not only is the gate *small* but the road itself is *narrow* (7:14). The roadway can also be described as *difficult* or *hard* since the word used here literally means “full of trouble” (U. Luz, *Theology of Matthew*, p 192). The Christian life is not an easy road to walk and many of us are quite familiar with its many challenges. We’re tempted, misunderstood, ridiculed, disliked and rejected. On a daily basis we struggle with our brokenness, weakness and sin. Many times on this journey, we become exhausted or apathetic and the fire goes out of our bones. Take courage, brothers and sisters, we don’t walk this path alone. We’re not lonely travellers on a rocky and narrow trail. The Master walks ahead of us leading the way for us. God is with us and the power of his Spirit strengthens us. His word guides our steps as the Psalmist has written, “*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*” (Psalm 119:105). And we travel in the company of brothers and sisters, here in this church and throughout the world. But most importantly, this path that is difficult leads *to life* and *to God!*

The challenge to our church is to take seriously two important and related tasks – evangelism and discipleship. Those who have found the *gate* and stepped over its threshold, have the opportunity to show others the way. Evangelism, however, has gotten a bad rap in our culture. It is often perceived as a pushy or forceful activity that beats people over the head with the gospel. But when we observe Jesus, our model of evangelism, we see someone who was caring, compassionate, and who listened to the people he encountered. In a very natural and loving way he met people where they were at and shared spiritual truths with them. But evangelism is not the end of our mission; we must help people to talk the talk and walk the walk. In other words, *we need to make disciples* (Matthew 28:19). Yet in our world of private spirituality, truly supporting each other on the road of discipleship is no easy task. We tend to keep our spiritual cards close to our chest, not letting our guard down lest we be judged or criticized for our questions, doubts and struggles. Yet the Christian life is not lived in isolation. God has placed us in a family with brothers and sisters who are on the same path as we are. So, we’ve got to support, encourage, confess to, and pray for each other and we can do this in some very simple ways. Join a small group Bible study, form a spiritual support group with two other Christians, seek someone to pray with on a regular basis, or find a spiritual friend that you can talk to. All these are helpful ways to share openly with other Christians about our walk with God and receive the encouragement that we all need on the Way.

**3. The Tale of the Two Trees**

 My exhortation to become open, humble, and vulnerable with your Christian brothers and sisters is not just for you who sit in the pews; it’s for me as well. A common problem for pastors is *isolation*. Ministers, priests and pastors often feel like they are all alone in their spiritual journey. Even though loving and caring congregations support them, they are reluctant to share openly with others for fear of judgment. At the same time, their position as spiritual leaders makes it difficult for them to talk about their spiritual struggles. So they keep up appearances and tread the difficult path alone. And their problems snowball because they are too fearful or prideful to reach out to others for help.

 Christian musician, Steve Taylor, speaks of this danger in his song, *I Just Wanna Know.*

*Folks play follow the leader
But who's the leader gonna obey?
Will his head get big when the toes get tapping?
I just wanna know, are they catching what I say?*

(<http://www.sockheaven.net/discography/taylor/fritz/i_just_wanna_know/>)

When things are going well in church, it’s easy for spiritual leaders to hide their inner lives from others. As the toes get tapping, it becomes too easy for pastors to take pride in their accomplishments instead of humbly obeying God. They say their prayers without truly communing with God; they read the Bible without really listening to God; they are busy for God yet their hearts are not his.

 They can become like these *false prophets* that Jesus warns us about. On the outside they look like *innocent sheep,* but on the inside they are *ravenous wolves* (7:15). Jesus tells us that over time this masquerade will end because the rottenness on the inside that has gone unchecked will ultimately result in bad fruit (7:16-19). After all, only good trees can produce good fruit. Only a life that Jesus cleanses and makes good can produce good deeds. Only a life lived in humble obedience to Jesus can produce good fruit.

So pastors need to talk the talk and walk the walk. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend the pastor’s day at the CBOQ Assembly. The pastors gathered there were blessed to hear Chap Clark, a Presbyterian minister and Seminary professor, whose specialty is youth ministry. His talk was filled with many great insights, but one thing really stuck with me. He said that young people and young adults want to see authentic Christian faith in our churches because they can spot a phoney a mile away. So, he challenged us to pray the words of the Psalmist, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Chap Clark said that this prayer for a pure heart is essential for all pastors. In the same vein, the song that I quoted earlier includes this lyric that expresses the heartfelt prayer of the songwriter.

*Search me, Father, and know my heart
Try me and know my mind
And if there be any wicked way in me
Pull me to the rock that is higher than I*

(<http://www.sockheaven.net/discography/taylor/fritz/i_just_wanna_know/#lyrics>)

**4. Secret Passwords and Flashy Deeds**

We want God to search our hearts because the people beyond our doors are looking for authentic expressions of Christian faith. So we can’t hide behind sheep’s clothes or mask our inner rottenness with phoney fruit. Nor should we fool ourselves into thinking that if we say the right words or do fantastic things for God that we can compensate for what’s really going on in our hearts and lives. God knows what’s going on. The true inhabitants of God’s kingdom don’t call out “Lord, Lord” as if it were some sort of magical password for getting in. No, those who follow Jesus recognize his Lordship by living a life of humble obedience to the Father’s will (7:21). It’s not about doing fantastic, flashy deeds for God. It’s about doing the sorts of things that Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount, like loving, forgiving, being humble and truly devoted to God.

It’s easy to get fooled into thinking that these extraordinary activities that Jesus refers to, like prophesying, casting out demons or doing miracles, are signs that we’re doing what God wants (7:22-23). In the same way, it’s easy for pastors to think that preaching a great sermon is doing God’s will. But these flashy acts are not a substitute for doing the Father’s will. Jesus says to us, “What is required is serious obedience—*doing* what my Father wills” (7:21, *The Message*). In his famous chapter on love, the apostle Paul writes, “If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-2, *The Message*).

If we don’t really love people, then our existence is meaningless. We can have all kinds of miracles, ministries, programs, sermons, worship songs, but if we don’t love people, then we’re not doing God’s will. If our message is that God loves the world, then we’ve got to love people. If our message is that God loves everybody, then we’ve got to love everybody, especially people who are different and who don’t easily fit into our comfortable world.

**5. Two Builders and Two Houses**

Jesus’ sermon was drawing to a close and he surveyed his audience and left them with this final image of two builders and two houses. The people were amazed at his teachings and his authoritative voice (7:28-29). But Jesus’ aim wasn’t to impress his audience with his great preaching; he wanted them to act upon the things he was saying. To drive this point home he told the story of two builders and two houses. Listen to Eugene Peterson’s translation of his tale.

“These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

“But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards” (7:24-29).

We’ve heard Jesus’ great sermon and now it’s time for us to respond. So are we ready to walk down the path that leads to life? Are we allowing God to produce good fruit in our lives? Are we seeking to do the Father’s will? Are we really hearing Jesus’ words and putting them into action? Are we building our house on the solid rock?