

*And Jesus said: "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!"*



Dear Congregation!

This text is the crashing finale to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is using familiar terms here to describe a life of faith: house, rock, sand, storms, wise, foolish... A house is a picture of safety and security, of warmth and shelter, of comfort and space. A storm is a picture of threat, the things that threaten to tear our lives apart and cause us to fall. We live in a stormy world. And from experience we know that when a storm hits our lives nobody is exempt from it. Life crises hits everybody, whether we have faith or not. Life happens. And when the stormy parts of life happen we all face the same threat: to be torn apart, for everything in and around us to fall apart.

In the daily headlines, we often hear about earthquakes, cyclones, floods and tornadoes. When Mother nature hits hard there is no discrimination. Solid, expensive homes are destroyed as well as modest dwellings. What about those who lost their homes? Some would say it's because they weren't religious or didn't have enough faith. Had they built their home on a solid foundation they would have been spared.

I think we can all agree that for people to make such statements is utterly preposterous. In fact, it was "religious" people like that to whom Jesus was speaking here in Matthew. He said to the religious folk who went around boasting of their own ability to prophesy and cast out demons in Jesus' name, "I never knew you."

Let's be honest with ourselves. Deep down we are still calculating that God's love and grace depends on our level of faith and righteousness, be it only the fact that we believe or at least try to. What gives us away as trusting ourselves at the end-of-the-day rather than trusting in God, is our reflexive instinct to hear the parable as a call to choose: Do or don't do. Build wisely on rock, foolishly on sand. Take your pick!

But then Jesus does say that a wise person builds their home on solid ground while a foolish person builds their home on sand. So, what did he mean? What do you think he means? How did you hear the words of Jesus? The first thing I heard was: Your choice: blessing or curse. Do my words and you win. Don't do them and you lose. Big time. Isn't that what this parable of builders boils down to?

What if we would hear this text from a different position? What if we would put ourselves in an uncomfortable position - the position of a beggar? Someone who does not have anything to build a house with, let alone owning a house. Honest beggars would not hear the parable as a call to choose because they are in no position to choose. They'd know from the get-go that they had nothing to build with and therefore no choices to make. In spiritual terms, this means that we would have no flashy deeds to flaunt with on our own behalf, like: "I tithe." "I sit on the church committee." "I volunteer at three soup kitchens." "I read the Bible daily." When we do this the winds will strike. The Lord speaks. Rooftiles fly, floorboards twist, and all of a sudden, our flimsy fabrications about ourselves and God are tumbling down around our ears. And there we will sit amongst the ruins, exposed as beggars, out of options for building material, utterly helpless...

So, what now? Well now we listen to the text all over again, though this time honestly, with the ears of real beggars. Gone is the temptation to hear it, as a call to action, a summons to the able-hearted to choose and do wisely – been there, tried that, and here I stand, the fool.

So let us hear these words instead as a description, an account of that which has already happened. And start with the question: Is there anywhere on earth a person who can rightly be called “a wise man”, someone who really did the words that Jesus spoke and built a house that can’t be tumbled because of a self-earned righteousness and rock-solid faith? Answer: Yes, there is. We’re listening to Him. Christ Jesus Himself. As the first crowds around Him noted, he speaks “as one having authority, and not as their scribes”; for unlike the scribes, who “do not practice what they teach”, Christ did, and still does. He did practice what He taught. The whole sermon on the mount in Matthew, from chapter 5-7. The cheek was turned, the extra mile walked, the enemies forgiven and the long list goes on.

Did all this ruin the speaker’s life? You bet. His life fell apart and came crashing down, on a rock, no less - on the rock of Golgotha. Very ironic, isn’t it? He was ruined for our sake, His life-house fell apart for us. But so perfect was He among the ruins – so perfect for us – that on the third day God raised Him from the ruins of death with “all authority in heaven and on earth” to keep doing the very things he keeps teaching. Jesus himself – teaching, calling, rebuking, exhorting, dying and rising – He built this house on a rock, - for us! Knowing that we are beggars – all out of building materials and options to build our own house, Jesus comes to us and gives us the keys to His. By faith, we stand inside this amazing house and look out the windows at the violent storms, and we are at peace. That’s what a house is for anyway, right? It is our peace in the world. And the One who built the house will say to our battered and beaten souls: Come to me, sit in the window with me, and take a break. Have a glass of wine. I am with you here, always.

Hearing this, who will not beg to be a beggar? Or who will not be quick to start praising God for a goodness so great and eternally anchored on the ferocious and rock-hard heights of Golgotha? A “good tree bears good fruit”, Jesus mentions earlier in his sermon. Of all the trees, the world has seen the best by far is the tree of the cross, and the fruit it bears is the TRUST IN YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN! That is what Jesus has been pointing toward during the whole sermon on the mount. When we read the whole sermon, Matthew 5-7, we will notice that nowhere does he say anything about God’s love and fatherly identity depending on choices

we have made or on deeds we have done – or failed to do. To the contrary, “Your Father makes His sun rise and his rain fall on evil and good, righteous and unrighteous alike” and stands ready to “give good things to those who ask him.” Again, no questions asked. By far the best things and the ones we need most badly as we shuffle through the storms and the ruins of our own deeds and choices are the cloak of Christ’s righteousness and a place in this wise man’s house. So “ask, and it will be given to you; knock and the door will be opened for you.” There’s a nice example of how we can do Jesus’ words – pray. If we merely hear or talk about prayer without actually praying, it remains theory only. But when we act upon the invitation to pray and actually do it, we begin to experience the promise it holds: strength, comfort and hope.

By the great mercy of God, the astounded then become the astounding. Think again of those first crowds around Jesus. Among them were many who eventually trotted off to “make disciples of all nations”, not only baptizing but also “teaching them to obey all that Jesus taught.” So also with our crowd around Jesus and His words today. Battered and beaten by the storms of life we’ll have been here, in His house and by His words. Away from here we’ll go anchored in Him, held up and encouraged by His righteousness, not our own; determined as the week unfolds to put His words into practice, not because we have to (or else!) but simply and wonderfully – because we want to. And not that we do it perfectly. Not that the storms of life and faith will not affect and threaten to tear us apart. But do His words, we will; and as we do it we will be like the wise man, our Lord, who built on the rock. And many, seeing our good works, will give glory to their Father in heaven.

And the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that does indeed surpass all our understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Him, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.