

## A Firm Foundation

Sermon delivered by Rev. Kate S. Forer  
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

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**Scripture:** Matthew 7:24-29

*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.*

When you were a child, maybe your family took trips to the shore. And you stood at the water's edge and felt the waves wash over your small feet. And as the tide came in, those feet started to sink into the sand. With each passing wave, a layer of sand gently covered them. You stood and looked over the water into the horizon and soon those two feet of yours were completely covered, although you never lifted a finger. All you had to do was stand still.

What I remember most about being a child in the summertime are the trips to the beach. I grew up not that far from Cape Cod and every summer we loaded the family minivan for our yearly vacation. Sun and water and good books to read and swimming.

As a child and of course even now, I have great respect for the ocean. It is refreshing and life giving and relaxing and destructive and dangerous and death dealing. It is something that demands our respect... and it changes everything it touches.

Sand castles built in the morning disappear by the afternoon. The sharp edges of glass, which once could slice through skin, become smooth and worn after time in the ocean. Things left in there, whether it be the wreckage of a wooden boat or a piece of metal, are slowly transformed by the creatures that attach themselves to the materials.

They say that in 6,000 years, Cape Cod will no longer exist. The land itself will be entirely washed away by the Atlantic. I don't know why this makes me sad, but it does. I don't expect to be here in 6000 years, but I still wish Cape Cod would.

If only the things we love about this world would last forever, right?

We build our lives around simple pleasures and what we love: spending time with people we love, places we love to go and things that make us happy and bring us joy. Family and friends, trips to the beach or the mountains, ice cream on summer evenings, a crisp apple in the fall, a cup of coffee at that place we love.

I wonder. . . Who are the people you have built your life around? Where are those places you return to? What are those things that bring you joy?

And what do we do when it all changes, as for many of us it has and for all of us it will. People pass on. Places change. What once brought joy no longer does. It all changes. And all you did was stand still, watching it wash over you because there was nothing else you could do. Like the ocean, life itself changes everything it touches. Including us.

In our Scripture lesson for today, Jesus tells the story of the wise and foolish builders.

Now these are not the wise and foolish builders also known as the three little pigs but they remind me of each other.

In the fairy tale of the three little pigs, you might remember, the materials the pigs decide to build their homes out of either protect them when the big bad wolf comes or do not as is the case of the two pigs who make their homes of sticks and straw . But the big bad wolf fails when the house is made of firmer substance, remember? What the children who hear this fairy tale learn is that what one uses to build his house matters. Choose the right material. Build for bad weather and bad wolves, for the unpredictable and the chance occurrence and you will be safe.

And in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is telling us that it is not simply what the house is made out of, but what it is built on, that matters.

For one man builds his house on sand and when the storms come, the house is washed away.

Another builds his house on rock and when the storms come, it does not fall.

These are not architectural or engineering instructions from Jesus. He's not really talking about where one should build a house. No, he's talking about how one should build a life, knowing that everything changes, that there will be loss and wind and rain and all sorts of other things you can't predict. And if you don't build it on something really sturdy than it can get washed away, destroyed, sunk when the first true storm hits.

So what does Jesus mean when he tells us this story? How are we to be wise and build our lives on that which will keep us standing strong?

Well, if we were paying attention to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we might have an idea. You see, before this vignette of the builders, Jesus has been teaching his followers. He starts with the Beatitudes—

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

—and then continues. You see, he tells us how to live—in relation to God and in relation to others.

Not to judge.

Not to listen to false prophets.

To give to the needy.

To pray and fast.

Not to worry.

Not to kill.

To love our enemies.

To be the salt of the earth and a light to the world.

The building blocks of a life built on the love of God and care for others.

And if we do these things, if we build our lives on such principles as caring for others, trust in God, self-discipline, the difficulties of loving even our enemies, spreading the light of God’s love, we will be like people who are built on rock and when the winds howl and the rain comes, our house will not fall.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes about farmers in the Midwest who, during really difficult winter storms, would tie a rope – one end to themselves and one end to the barn – before they went out. In case they lost their way the rope would help lead them back. Farmers had died only steps from safety during blizzards because they could not find their way in the swirling snow.

Palmer says that “Today we live in a blizzard of another sort.”

He writes:

*It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others.*

For Palmer that rope back is the soul, the true self. For Jesus that rock is life in God. For some it is the divine spark of God in all of us.

It's the one who stands on the shore and watches everything change but remains the same. The core of who we are.

Your theme for this summer has been who is my neighbor. It seems to me that this question, posed at a time in the life of our nation when we shirk responsibility for anyone but ourselves, is almost painful to ask. But the answer we know. Jesus has asked us to build our lives on that answer, on our fidelity to our neighbor and to God. On the teachings of Jesus. On the love of the Creator.

When times are difficult, we remember that rope back to safety, or that foundation on which our lives are built, those things that are solid and ever present in times of uncertainty.

Recently a colleague, Rev. Ryan Henderson, wrote about resilience as one of the greatest spiritual gifts in this chapter of life.

He writes that "this type of Resilience is NOT about getting back to normal, or dusting off your shoes after loss, or getting back to some idealized past memory. Resilience," he says, "is the slow process of surviving major trauma, it is the ability to recover after loss, misfortune, anger and out of your control/in your face change."

Resilience. One of the greatest spiritual gifts in this particular chapter of life.

Many years ago in another congregation, a beloved parishioner suffered through a 5-plus-year terminal and rare lung disease. As it got more difficult for her, I will never forget the day she stood up during joys and concerns and shared with us that her greatest fear was not death but rather was that she might become bitter. That the illness would make her bitter. She exuded love and a joy for life and she was terrified her illness might take that away. She had built her life on something stronger than even her mortal flesh and she was determined never to have that taken from her and she didn't. She died as she lived: loving, compassionate, gentle and joyful.

In his letter, Ryan Henderson wrote further about resilience and reminded me of that beloved parishioner. He wrote:

*The American Poet and Civil right activist Dr Maya Angelou says "I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it." Many of us, and our congregations, deeply feel the change that is occurring in our midst: CoVid-19, Sickness, Racist Words/Acts, Diminishing Resources and working/teaching/ministering in a way that none of us may have ever dreamed or hoped would become necessity. Some of us have spent lots of energy focusing on what will never be "status quo" again. However, Dr. Angelou's words remind us that no matter how many things change in our lives, Change does not have the power to reduce who we are as humans. "*

"I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it." How we treat others. Our faith in God. Who we are at our core. That divine spark inside.

Life happens. We stand at the shore and watch everything change around us. But we are not standing in sand. No, we are standing on something much, much more solid. In fact, we have built our whole lives on it. The love of God – for us and for all people. Our love for those around us. Grace. Forgiveness. Compassion. Self-sacrifice.

And while everything feels like it might be changing, and yes, even we have changed, we are not reduced. We are not bitter. We are not hateful. We have not closed off our hearts.

As changes in life swirl around us, we remember our true self, our life with God, our calling as the church and we stand on the foundation that has been built for us. And we will not fall.

Amen.