

### **The Church's One Foundation**

Mtt. 7:21-27, Rom. 3:21-25a, 28, Deut. 11:18-21, 26-28

What in the world were the lectionary people thinking when they put these three scripture lessons together? There's no theme here, no common denominator. Or so I was convinced when I came to my *Sermon Workshop* a couple weeks ago. "*I'll have to focus on just one of the scripture lessons,*" I told them, "*because there's no common thread running through them.*" "*Why don't you preach on Christ as the foundation and see how the other scripture passages fit in?*" one of them said to me. "*Christ as the foundation...*" Suddenly I saw the theme underlying the lessons and the work of the lectionary writers began to make sense.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said,

*Everyone 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!*

What is the rock that we are to build upon, the foundation upon which we are to lay our faith? Is Jesus himself not our rock, our foundation? Seeing his life, hearing his words and living out his life are the way we build upon that foundation.

The Shema is the foundation of Jewish faith and practice. Those are the words our passage from Deuteronomy commands them to remember.

*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and your gates...*

The Shema – *Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* That is the beginning part of the prayer said every morning and evening in Judaism. Today's passage from Deuteronomy is one of four passages where the Israelites were enjoined to bind these words on their head and affix them to their hand and put them on their doorposts. Orthodox Jews follow this commandment literally. When they say their morning and evening prayers they wear a *tefillin* (or phylacteries) affixed by leather straps upon their foreheads and on their upper arm. Similarly the Mezuzah is affixed to the front door (and often all the doors) in an Orthodox Jewish home. These words are affixed to one's head and arm and to the door as a reminder. **This is foundational.** This is who we are and what we believe. *Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your*

*heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* You shall obey all of God's Law and follow him with everything you are and have and you will be blessed.

The section of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans reminds me what is foundational to the Christian faith. All of us – everyone – has fallen far short of the glory of God. Each of us is a sinner cut off by our own failings from the God who made and loves us. But the wonderful gift of God is that he sought us out while we were still lost and unworthy. He restored us to right relationship with His love through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus our Lord. This is an amazing gift, not our birthright, not something we can ever earn or deserve, but a completely free and undeserved gift. And so in Christ Jesus we are justified by faith through grace.

Two weeks ago we met as a parish and through a nearly unanimous vote agreed that we would move forward in our capital building project to do all the major work that needed to be done to preserve and restore our buildings, even beyond the amount we have raised in our capitol fund drive. *St. John's rising* we have called it. And why *St. John's rising*? Because, of course, St. John's is sinking! At least our middle building is. About a century and a half ago the designers of the Middle building between the church and the then Rectory made the classical error Jesus warned against in today's

Gospel lesson. They built on sand. They didn't mean to build on sand; they didn't think they were building on sand. But the boulder they set the foundations on was a false bedrock and for a century and a half a significant portion of St. John's has been steadily sinking. The winds have beaten against it. Various floods have come – one of the reasons we keep the sump pump on! The ravages of time have worn against it, and if we don't do something to shore it up and rebuild on a more solid foundation great will be its fall!

Just as we want to put our buildings on a solid foundation so we need to put our faith and practice as the Church on a solid foundation through both *hearing* what Jesus had to tell us and *doing* it.

*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord* we sang in our opening hymn. What does that foundation look like? I think our starting place is the same *Shema* as in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6:4ff: *Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

But for Christian faith that is the starting point not the ending point. The second key point goes something like this: *Hear O People of God, the Lord our God is love revealed. The Lord our God is love revealed. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, may not perish but may have*

*eternal life.”* (Jn. 3:16) Jesus shows us God. He shows us what God’s love looks like and feels like. Jesus shows us God’s human face. The late great 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Karl Barth, whose lengthy and complicated multi-volume work of *Systematic Theology* is still one of the most important theological works of our time, once said in reply to a typically American question: *How would you boil down all that you believe into a simple truth?* Karl Barth replied, *“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so!”* Jesus shows us God’s compassion, God’s love, God’s forgiveness, and God’s invitation to love as He loves.

Paul’s words to the Romans remind us of a key point of our foundation in Christ. God’s love is a gift. We can receive the gift of God’s love by faith. We can say with awe and wonder, *“thank you!”* We can recognize that through God’s love we are forgiven, made new, washed clean, welcomed into God’s family as his holy people, and given the gift of eternal life. But no matter how hard we try we can never earn it. We don’t deserve it. We can’t achieve it. God’s love is pure and simple, a gift, given us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Yet another key part of that foundation in Christ is relationship. God invites us into a living relationship. He adopts us as his beloved children. He gave us his Son, not just back then in Jerusalem from 0-33 AD, but now! Jesus lives. God raised him from the dead. Jesus

promised his disciples and he promises us that he will always be with us. He promises to live in us and that we can also live in him.

Finally, he invites us to follow his example and words through loving as he loved. The second commandment Jesus taught, very much like the first one of loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind and body, is to love our neighbor as ourself.

Edward Mote, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist preacher in England, wrote these touching words.

*My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly trust in Jesus' Name.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand.  
All other ground is sinking sand (2 times)*

*When darkness seems to hide his face,  
I rest on his unchanging grace.  
In every high and stormy gale,  
My anchor holds within the veil.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand.  
All other ground is sinking sand (2 times)*

*His oath, His covenant, His blood,  
Support me in the whelming flood.  
When all around my soul ives way,  
He then is all my Hope and Stay.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand.  
All other ground is sinking sand (2 times)*

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus is pure love revealed. His love and grace and life is a free gift. He

invites us into a living relationship. He calls us to live to serve others as he lived to serve us. That is our foundation. We should take this Christian foundation and make it the living foundation of the building project of *St. John's Rising* that we are beginning. We should teach them to our children. We should imprint them on our minds and hands. We should live them in our actions and in our deeds. For, as Jesus said, *Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand.  
All other ground is sinking sand (2 times)*