

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Second Sunday in Lent- March 5, 2023

Scripture lesson: Matthew 7:7-29

THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS, OUR CHRIST- "What Will We DO?"

As Mary indicated in the preface to today's Scripture, Jesus' closing of his Sermon on the Mount begins with more teaching about prayer. He calls us to persist in regularly turning to and opening our hearts to God. He tells us to keep "asking, searching, and knocking", because our Abba in heaven who longs to be with us wants to give us more and more "good things".

What are those good things that Jesus wants us to keep asking for? Are they *anything at all* that our hearts might desire? No, because in the very next verse, he says, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you."

In other words, keep asking God for whatever will help us to treat others as we want to be treated. It's his famous "Golden Rule" and with it he summarizes the essence of the many good things that he wants us to keep asking God for and that he assures us our Abba in heaven wants to give to us.

When Jesus compares this to the wide spectrum of things that our hearts can *selfishly* desire, he knows, as he says in verses 13 and 14, that these good things represent a narrow gate and a harder road. But he still insists on them simply because they *are* good. The good things that really are good always take into account the welfare of every neighbor. *That* is the way that God means for this life to be, and that *is* the road to the deepest, truest, and richest satisfactions that our hearts can desire.

Unfortunately, as Jesus goes on to explain in verses 15-21, the possibilities for losing track of this fundamental truth are vast. For instance, we can quickly go astray by following the lead of those who appear to seek the good, but who, in fact, do not. Would-be leaders can often appear so inviting, impressive, powerful, and- here's the real kicker- deeply religious. They can freely, openly, and repeatedly hail Jesus as their Lord, BUT . . . that's a far, far cry from the real bottom line that Jesus calls us to heed.

He reminds us that we can claim God, God, God, or Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, or Allah, Allah, Allah, or Torah, Torah, Torah as the sanction for our actions every day and all day, and yet still be evildoers. The key questions, both for us and for anyone we're inclined to follow are: "What kind of fruit does our life and their life bear? What is our true character and what is theirs as revealed by those fruits? On what foundation are we and they actually building our lives?"

The foundation image is central to Jesus' Parable of the Two Builders. He uses it at the end of his Sermon on the Mount to highlight, as he does in many other places, the prime importance both of our deeds and the spirit in which we do them. It's one of the most gripping of all of his parables and it fittingly concludes everything that he's said before.

It features the truth that whether we recognize it or not, each of us is at work day by day to build our soul, i.e., to give substance and shape to who we really are. We construct our character, experience by experience, choice by choice, and deed by deed. All the things that happen to us and every decision we make in response to them, whether for good or for ill, take their place in the foundation of our life.

Sadly, though, it seems that we frequently don't realize the choices that we're actually making and the consequences that they ultimately will have.

For instance, how many of us doubt that this story is true? A man spends most of his time accumulating money enough to build one of the biggest houses his town has ever seen. He works *long, long* hours to get rich, spending most of his life on the road, working tirelessly. At last, the house of his dreams, his mansion on a hill, begins to go up.

But three years later when it's finally finished, so is the man's marriage. His wife has left him. His children are completely alienated and estranged from him. He spends his first Christmas in his new house all alone.

Yet hard knocks don't come our way only from wrong choices that we make. We get hammered too by things that are not our fault. We learn that innocent suffering is indeed a brute fact of life in this broken and fallen world.

Accident or injury from out of the blue, illness that we can't see coming, job loss from forces beyond our control, a loved one snatched away by death much too soon- things like that happen all the time. Gashed, beaten, broken, and bruised- all of us end up wounded both from our own misdeeds and from misfortunes that we suffer innocently. Or as Jesus puts it in his Parable of the Two Builders- the rains fall, the floods come, and the winds blow and beat. It's not a matter of *if*; it's only a matter of when.

And when the rains, floods, and winds come, do the wounds that they inflict defeat us? Or do we heal from them and stand strong? It depends on the quality of the foundations on which we build our lives.

If we build on rock, we will stand. If we build on sand, we will fall. We're on rock, Jesus says, if we hear his words *and act on them*. But we build on sand, if we hear them and *don't* do them. What we *do* is what matters. What we do makes us into who we are.

So, again, what does Jesus say that we need to do? That's what his whole Sermon on the Mount has been about and it's time now to bring it all to mind and do our best to take it straight to heart. He begins with his beatitudes, calling us to embrace the blessings of God's kingdom come near. How we do that?

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who know their dependence on God, who give up every pretense that they're in charge, on top, or in control. Blessed are those who let go of every illusion that their worth lies in anything that they can ever earn, achieve, make or deserve. Blessed are those who readily face up to their weaknesses, vulnerabilities, messes, and failures." In other words, blessed are the poor in spirit.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who feel steadily this world's brokenness in sin. Blessed are those who feel it so deeply that they can't let go of it so long as creation remains broken. Blessed are those who understand that God feels this with them and who do with it the same thing that God does- namely, use it to stoke their determination to do everything they can to heal creation and to faithfully witness to the new heaven and earth that God has promised." In other words, blessed are those who mourn.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those whose spiritual and moral strength are disciplined and eager to do God's will, above all. Blessed are those whose mightiness of soul is intent solely on doing what God wants. Blessed are those who are powerful enough to submit only to God, to the only One to whom submission truly is due. In other words, blessed are the meek.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who nourish their souls with the food and drink of God's reign. Blessed are those who regularly feast on God by practicing Sabbath rest, spiritual friendship, prayer, self-examination, confession, and meditation on God's word. Blessed are those who commune with God through deeds of loving service, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger." In other words, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who know that God's reign is full of mercy. Blessed are those who feel so deeply their own need for mercy that they gratefully embrace God's gift of it. Blessed are those who know that God's justice is done by giving mercy to others because of God's abundant mercy towards every one of us." In other words, blessed are the merciful.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are free from the plague of mixed motives or scattered attention or divided loyalties or appearances on the outside that don't match who they are on the inside. Blessed are those whose inner life is directed in singleness of passion towards God. Blessed are those who cultivate this passion through simple and honest turnings towards God day by day." In other words, blessed are the pure in heart.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who treat people with whom they're in conflict, above all, as fellow children of God. Blessed are those who in times of strife still recognize everyone, first and foremost, as sisters and brothers in God's family. Blessed are those who remember that no matter where any of us comes down on any matter that's in dispute among us, all of us are totally and ultimately dependent on God's boundless grace and mercy for the very gift of our lives." In other words, blessed are the peacemakers.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who suffer for the sake of doing right even at the hands of those who do them wrong. Blessed are those who keep on loving others no matter how much those others may be bent on doing evil to them. Blessed are those who can relish the reward of reconciliation in heaven with those who may even have murdered them here on earth." In other words, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

Having announced his beatitudes, Jesus goes on to say, "Don't harbor grudging anger or belittling contempt towards anyone. Instead, go immediately to anyone that we've done wrong and do our best to reconcile with them."

He says, "Resist the temptation to leering lust. Honor God's gift of sexual attraction and keep sacred the bond of marriage to which it can lead."

He says, "Practice integrity in our speech. Make sure that our yes means yes and our no means no."

He says, "Don't do our good deeds or acts of piety for any public show, display, or approval. Do them only for God."

In teaching us his model for prayer, Jesus says, "Put God's holiness, kingdom, and will first and pray, above all, to honor and live in accord with them. Pray to have enough for today, no more and no less. Gratefully receive and use the material goods that we have as blessings from God meant to be shared freely, especially with all who are in need. Be sure as well to always forgive one another as freely as God forgives us."

Having given us his prayer, Jesus then tells us, "Don't worry about our life, especially about our stuff, about what we will eat or drink or wear. Put God's reign and its righteousness first and God will make sure that we have everything else that we need."

He says, "Don't be judgmental. Keep working instead on correcting our own faults. Know that this is the only way that we'll ever see clearly enough or that others will ever let us get close enough to help them to correct theirs."

And once more, as he said at the start of today's Scripture reading, "Keep pursuing God for every good gift. Know that good gifts are those that help us to treat others in the ways that we want to be treated."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus leaves no doubt that the deeds that he calls us to do are substantial and challenging. He makes plain that it's no small thing at all to build our lives on rock.

Yet it remains inescapably true that the foundations of who we are, are laid by what we do. The deeds that we choose can be wise or foolish, and the foundations that we build on can be strong or weak.

Jesus loves us too much to sugarcoat any of those facts. As one who teaches with authority, he lays before us the choices that will enable us to build wisely. But the decisions are always ours. What will we *do*?

By God's grace, we will embrace the blessings of God's reign come near. In doing that, we will recognize that the rains, the floods, and the winds will still come. But, by God, when they do, we will stand strong. Amen.