

Spirituality for the Storm

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Texts: Matthew 7:21-29; Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28

The word of God is solid ground (HWB 314)

Nearly 500 years ago Anabaptists sang these words--in German, of course--because they were convinced by reading the Bible in a Spirit-filled community that a life of discipleship and Christlike love was truly more powerful--a stronger foundation for the church than reliance on the state, the scholars, or the sword.

I love the line in this hymn that says--*What Godword brings may we embrace; success and suffering greet us.* In other words, when we act on what Christ has given us to do, there is success; there is growth and fruit and joy in abundance. And when we do what Christ has given us to do there is suffering too--our Savior went to the cross. The Anabaptist legacy is one of wild success and very serious suffering. I say wild success because nearly 500 years later Anabaptist understandings of the Way of Jesus Christ are relevant and even revelatory when they are lived out in neighborhoods, watersheds, and nations like ours. The Anabaptists believed that the word of God was not a wooden, literal, ancient word, but a living word, transformative contemporary word that could be heard through careful reading of scripture and listening to the Holy Spirit within the gathered community.

Improvisation

I don't know why you came to worship this morning, but here's a good Anabaptist a reason to attend worship: to listen for God's word to you and to us, so that you can live it, so that you can practice it today and tomorrow. So what is God's word today? Perhaps you've already heard it and don't need a sermon...

Construction Zone

Lots of parables are puzzling, but our parable this morning is a no-brainer. There are , but we got this one. The wise builder chooses a solid rock foundation and the house weathers the storm. The fool builds on sand, the storm destroys the house and great was the fall. This parable is the conclusion of a big fat teaching section--three chapters of Jesus teaching us how to live. In Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7 it's like Jesus is laying out all the building materials, and the tools, and even pointing out a great site, but

building the house is our work. When we hear the teaching of Jesus and act on it, we are building on a solid foundation and will weather the storms of life. You have heard it said, ***unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain***, but Jesus says go ahead and build, just be wise about it. Listen to what I'm saying and act on it.

A little over 12 years, when my parents were almost 60 they built a house in rural Henry County, KY. Now they are ready to sell it and move to be near their favorite daughter...my sister. Their house was supposed to close at the end of February, but the deal fell through after the inspection because the foundation is damaged. And it's going to be a costly repair--of waterproofing and mold management to dry out the timbers, then re-work the crawl space to include sub pumps and drainage out of opposite corners.

A lot has changed in housing construction from the world of ancient Palestine to 21st century US, but the foundation of a house is still important. If we examine the foundation we can predict something about the future of the building. Apparently, if my folks don't make these repairs in the next year or so the house could tilt or shift or collapse! Jesus said: ***Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them is a like a wise builder, who builds on a rock foundation, so that when--not if, but when-- the storm comes the house doesn't fall.***

Brothers and sisters, in building the community Christ has called us to build--a peace church where everyone is welcome--it is our responsibility to act on what God is saying to us. We have to exercise our unique gifts in the unique circumstances we face. It is not an option to just passively accept what Jesus says and believe it is true in some abstract sense. Christian truth is always lived truth, lived by ordinary people--who only know in part, yet trust God enough to act on what we have heard.

According to Jesus we either act on God's word or we're fools. And sooner or later we're going to be seeking shelter amid a pile of storm tossed rubble.

In the Heights

On Friday Kent and I went to see the musical at Fort Defiance High School. The message that with patience and faith--paciencia y fe--diverse people can build community and make a home that can weather the storms of life--reflects the best of the American spirit. The story of *In the Heights*, by Quiara Alegria Hudes is the kind of intercultural American story that we need not

only in big expensive theaters, but in small town high schools across the country. The music by Lin Manuel Miranda, the outstanding performances by the students and the vision and faith of high school directors to stage this show at this time in our country was an example to me of acting on what you have heard.

CMC Vision Update

In 2016 Community Mennonite Church engaged a vision process and at the conclusion we had some sense for what God was saying to us. There were three areas that we considered core practices of our congregation to continue and enhance through our various commissions. These are: welcoming children and youth; Bible stories for real life; and stories in worship.

There are also three new initiatives that we're pursuing: launching a Mennonite Voluntary Service unit; interchurch and interfaith activities in our local community; and art projects in and around the church building.

Finally there were a couple of areas for ongoing discernment: becoming a greener congregation and starting a mid-week Kids Club. I think the green congregation is something we're hearing pretty clearly, but we're not sure how to act on it yet, so Council will form a task force later this spring. The Mid-Week Kids Club is something we're not sure whether we're hearing is for us specifically, but we're inspired by what other local congregations are experiencing as they reach out to diverse children in their neighborhoods.

Whenever we as a congregation act on what we have heard God saying to us, we are building a solid foundation for the future church.

Jesus enacted the word of God

Jesus said that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. He did. In his actions, in and through his life, Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets. He enacted God's word through his life and his death; his resurrection and reign. As disciples of Jesus we are also those who fulfill the word of God. We act on what God says to us. We don't always get it just right, but discipleship is experiential learning. We learn as we take action and then listen again for God's word to us. Brothers and sisters, taking action on the word we're hearing from God is the foundation of spirituality for the storm. God speaks a word to us that will sustain us in the storm.

Buckminster Fuller was a 20th century American philosopher-scientist whose work defied even those categorizations. Fuller called himself a comprehensive anticipatory design scientist. He once said: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." I think Jesus, fulfilling the law and the prophets was building a new model in order to make the existing model obsolete. If you think about it, Jesus did not directly fight against the Roman Empire. Jesus did not dismantle the Temple-State of his Sadducee and Pharisee brothers in faith. Jesus' tension with and even opposition toward the destructive institutions and systems of his society included some confrontation of Temple politics, some resistance to the Roman Empire. But--listen up--Jesus spent most of his time and most of his energy building something new, something resilient, something that did not seem possible. In the gospel of Matthew--perhaps more than any of the other four gospel--we meet Jesus establishing the kingdom of God and building a church community that will change the world. And very early in the gospel, here in chapter 7, Jesus says--*Come on. Build with me. Here are the materials. Here are the tools. Here's a good site--right where you're standing and right where I'll lead. Come, build.*

That's why I'm a pastor. And that's probably why you're doing some of what you're doing--because you're acting on what God has said to you. You're living into what Christ has shown you. Maybe you're not always completely confident that you've heard the word. I know I'm not. That's why we gather for worship--to listen for God again and again and hear each others' stories. That's the only way to build a church that can weather a storm.

Jesus and Jeremiah

OK, here's the part of the sermon that I didn't want to preach, but I I've gotta do it. You know Jesus says: ***everyone who hears my words and does not act them will be like a fool who builds a 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!*** That part of the parable is a fitting summary of what happened to a nation back in Jeremiah's day. The prophet Jeremiah heard the word of the Lord, but people didn't act on it. Jeremiah said to his nation: ***Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from oppression anyone who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the immigrant or the orphan, or the widow. Don't shed innocent blood. ...If you do not act on these words, this house will be destroyed. (Jeremiah 22:3,5)***

I don't think Jesus' message in the sermon on the Mount was that new. What he had was a fresh authority in his time. He was not like the scribes who were beginning to rely on the state, the scholars--the legal scholars--and the sword. Jesus had a fresh authority because he was living out the words of the prophets! What Jeremiah knew 600 years before Jesus and what the Anabaptists knew 1500 years after Jesus. We have heard 500 years later, but now is our time to act. This downtown Harrisonburg neighborhood, this Chesapeake Bay watershed, this country needs the fresh authority of people acting on the word we have heard from God--building a new model of community and church.

I think Jesus really understands humanity. He knows we're not going to hear everything at once. He knows we're not going to hear everything clearly. But we've got to be faithful and responsible with what we've heard so far. In this big fat teaching section we call the sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave us practical ways to prepare for a storm, live through a storm and clean up after a storm. What he said is also good for fair weather--but let's face it--a lot of approaches appear to work during fair weather. We're looking for spirituality that meets the storm test.

Jesus says...

1. In the beatitudes--know who you are. You are blessed--even at your worst, you're blessed.
2. Be salt and light through service and loving the unloved (the enemies).
3. Pray seriously. Ask God for help.
4. Jesus teaches us to interrupt the cycles of judgement within our communities.
5. Jesus teaches us to interrupt cycles of worry within ourselves.

Storms are already upon us. The foundation we are building with the guidance of Jesus Christ our Lord is for a future church.

Charles Tindley (1851-1933)

I'll end this morning with a bit of another American story. Charles Tindley wrote two of the hymns we're singing today. He was a late 19th and early 20th century African American minister and composer of gospel music, including perhaps the strains of *We shall overcome*. Tindley's father was a slave, but his mother was free. Born in 1851 he had no formal education, he so much wanted to hear God's word that as a young man in Philadelphia he

became friends with a local rabbi and studied Hebrew. He saved his money from jobs carrying bricks and being a church custodian in order to study Greek by correspondence. Eventually Tindley was ordained in the Methodist tradition during the social gospel era. Tindley acted on God's word not only writing hymns, but also enabling members of his large congregation to find jobs. He led his congregation to form a building and loan association for home mortgages, so that African Americans had opportunities for more equitable financial security in this country.

God's word for us today is to act on what we have heard--*success and suffering greet us.*