

## **Sermon, 1 June 2008—Proper 4**

Genesis 6:9-22;7:24;8:14-9; Psalm 46; Matthew 7:21-9

The words of Jesus that we heard today are the words Matthew has chosen to close the Sermon on the Mount. As happens so often in this Gospel, Matthew wraps things up ominously. There is something of the spiritual pessimist—some might say realist—in Matthew. The cost of failure in the spiritual life, as far as he is concerned, is high: a fiery outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. So the Sermon on the Mount, which includes beautiful words that have strengthened and reassured many, ends, not with affirmation, but with admonition, not with comfort, but with menace, not with rest, but with threat. The one positive glimpse in this passage is this. Jesus says, “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.”

It helps to recall what Jesus has been saying in the Sermon on the Mount, because hearing and acting on these words of his is not easy. Pray in secret. Hide your charity. Offer to go an additional mile, when someone forces you to go one. If someone slaps you, offer them your other cheek. If someone asks for your jacket, give your shirt also. Don't worry about tomorrow. Don't judge. Don't be angry. Don't look with lust. Forgive. Oh, and by the way, be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

Ever since those words were made public, people have been hard at work explaining them away. My favorite is the comment that none of these words were ever meant to be taken at face value, because we must understand that Semitic peoples are naturally given to exuberant overstatements—and Jesus

was a Jew, after all, and excitable. So as long as we understand his principles, we can move on to find our own practices, which will be truer to us and more natural for us, and which don't move us out of our comfort zone any more than Jesus had to move out of his with these exaggerations. German Biblical scholarship came up with that way of getting off the hook.

But Jesus specifically states that we must act on what we heard him say, and that if we do, we will be founded on a rock that will withstand the coming tempest. Some say this means that, if you acquiesce and keep all the rules scrupulously, then on the great and terrible Day of the Lord, when Jesus returns, if you are found to have obeyed Jesus' commands, you will live forever with him in the hereafter. If you don't, you're toast. So get to work getting it right.

You don't need me to say that this does not strike most of us—and most outside the Church—as Good News at all. This is not an easy yoke or a light burden, let alone an abundant life. This is self-depriving despair while we speculate on a future return. Most of us, though, don't even attempt it. We dismiss all the counsels of perfection threaded through the Sermon on the Mount: they are beautiful; maybe Jesus could live that way; we can't.

Then, having given up on ever managing to *be* good, we hope that we can at least *look like* we are good, and hope—if anything this panicky and shameful can be called hope—that at least our knowing that we are failures will count for something. Of course, we hope for forgiveness. But is our life so small that the goal we want to set our sights on is forgiveness? And are we going to take for granted that God will simply forgive us, over and over, as we confess our inability to follow Him, over and over? Settling into this is settling for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous "cheap grace," which is the gamble that God doesn't take this any more seriously than we do. I believe that, at our best, we don't want to be forgiven constantly; what we want is not to need forgiveness all the time.

If we have a longing to follow Christ, a desire to be better than what we are when we are left to our own devices, a hope that we can live a life free of our bondage to our preferences and pretensions, then the Sermon on the Mount holds out that impossible possibility: we can live without anger, fear, anxiety, lust, self-regard, resentment, judgment, calculation. This Sermon tells us how one does that. It will cost everything, but it can be done—and isn't freedom from our bondage what we want?

Perhaps some of you have strapped on the backpack for the second mile, given what was asked of you and more, forgiven because you are tired of the sourness of your mouth. Finally, you moved beyond intention into action. Perhaps, if you are like me, on a particularly good day, those actions lasted part of the morning, and you spent the afternoon wondering if anyone had noticed your generosity, your thoughtfulness, and even your own backpack, which someone really should offer to carry for you now. Perhaps, you discovered that the residue of ambitious goodness is a thirst for revenge. Perhaps you tried again, and became increasingly tired of this hamster wheel of effort and failure and moral exhaustion. Will there be, then, no escape ever from your self?

Of course, this vision of our smallness and weakness means that we are already somehow seeing things from a perspective larger than our own. Because we recognize this larger frame in which we seem so frail and failed, we can become convinced that something beyond ourselves must provide the only solution—if there can be a solution.

There is a solid rock to build on here. It is often said, because it is said elsewhere in Scripture, that the rock is Christ. That is an improvement. The rock to build on is not your virtue, which is a fiction, but Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. For many, though, that is equally a counsel of

despair: how do we know that we are building on Christ? And if we assert that this is at least spiritually true, does that mean Christ is perpetually beyond our understanding? Can we know what this building looks like on a daily basis?

So let me suggest that the secret of this is what goes into hearing and acting. Jesus says those who hear his words and act on them are building on rock. Perhaps you have been in a situation where someone you care about deeply is saying something that matters to them, but somehow you are not getting it. You wonder why this matters so much and what exactly it is that matters. Now you can listen with impatience, looking for a way to remove the irritation, or you can listen with anxiety, wondering what this bizarre outlook has to do with you. Or you can listen with some amazement at how little you know the person before you, as if you were meeting a new person, astonished also at the revelation that you had fallen into a self-satisfied deafness. If this person matters to you, you will make every effort to *hear* what they are saying.

Perhaps you have been in a situation where someone you care about deeply needs—not wants, *needs*—something urgently and cannot obtain it themselves. Perhaps as the result of finally hearing, you realize that you must take an action new to you. Again, you might wonder why this matters so much; again you might act impatiently to remove the irritation or anxiously to protect your own investment in the relationship. Or you might act quickly and cleanly, shaken that you had not known what the person's true needs are, astonished at the revelation that you had fallen into self-satisfied lethargy. If this person matters to you, you will make every effort to *act* to satisfy their actual needs.

Notice that being able to hear and being able to act must go together. You can hear without changing behavior or you can act without listening, but neither of those will show your faithfulness and love. It is as if hearing and acting must be one thing: paying attention and responding.

This is what I am calling your attention to this morning. The distance between hearing and acting is the human person. You must present yourself into relationship fully alertly receptively in order to hear and act. What makes hearing and acting one thing is you, the one person who hears and acts, the one person who guarantees consistency between hearing and acting, the one person able to hear something new and to do something new. You are the one who closes the gap between hearing and acting. The rock that cannot be shaken is the question with which you come to know yourself: how do I move from hearing to acting? And that question transforms itself eventually into this one: how do I know what is good and move forward accordingly? The effort of closing this gap is where you discover who you really are; it is where you come to know yourself. This is why the desert hermits said that coming to know your self this deeply is coming to know God.

Think of any single injunction that you might experiment with. What is it like simply to offer, without comment, without self-important effort, the second mile? Suddenly, we begin to feel the grip of our old habits, of our defensive worldview, of our preferred self-image. We cannot be what we claimed to want to be: we forget we hear, we fall short when we act. We quickly see the gap between purpose and performance.

But this attention to our underachieving self, when we face it without fear or resentment, *is* the rock that withstands the tempest. Wondering who this is who purposes and fails; wondering how our failure comes about; wondering why hope returns; wondering how I forgive myself and what that implies about how I forgive others—this is the spiritual journey. Suddenly turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, forgiving, not judging—all these become the tools of self-discovery, and of the discovery of God who sustains us, who makes it possible for us to move from hearing to acting.

This deepening self-knowledge is achieved in the light of standards which are not our own, but which we receive—we “hear”—from Scripture and the wisdom of the Church. These standards call into question every evasion and self-justification. And we learn our true relation to them when we try to live by them, when we enter into mutual formation, mutual shaping of each other, in the ongoing life of the congregation and its ministries—when we “act.” This humble habit of daily examining ourselves and our behavior by their light, which we can only do by the grace of God, becomes the rock which withstands every tempest. The delusional self-importance of our virtue is sand; everything we build on it is swept away by the sudden hurricane of our anger or our desire or our fear. But the habit of compassionate self-scrutiny—to observe how the person you are links hearing and acting—can be applied in every circumstance of your life, even on your deathbed; and the ever-present quality of this inner witness, the eye of God, is the rock that undergirds your entire life.

When we discover that, we have found the rock—and you see, it turns out the rock *is* Christ, because this spirit of compassionate self-scrutiny, of patient self-inquiry, of loving healing, is the very Spirit of the One who amazed all who heard him with his words, himself the Only-begotten Word, who is willing to dwell with us and in us, and whom, with the Eternal Source and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, we praise this day.