

Matthew 7:13-28
Firm Foundation or Sinking Sand?
By Amanda A. Nevin

Our passage this morning comes at the end of Jesus' most famous sermon the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins with a series of blessings- blessed are the peacemakers, the pure in heart, the humble and so on. Jesus then moves to the commands, the moral codes by which we are to conduct our lives- do not lust, do not have anger in your hearts, forgive others, pray continually and do not worry. Jesus concludes his sermon with three warnings. These are not mere suggestions on how to live they are lessons on living now as Disciples of Christ. Common to Matthew's gospel our lessons come in pairs- the two gates, the two prophets, the two foundations.

In the first illustration there are 2 gates, the narrow gate that leads to life and the wide gate that leads to destruction. The narrow gate is a call to conversion; the call to make Jesus Lord and a call to live take on the task of living out the sermon in a real and practical way. This is warning is both about salvation and how we are to live as Christians in the here and now. The narrow gate that leads to life and salvation is hard because it requires us to go against everything our culture deems important. The wide gate is the gate that is easy, that follows the ways of the world and ultimately leads to destruction and death. We just learned what the Sermon on the Mount is about: we are called to be humble, to show mercy, to seek after righteousness, to be peacemakers, to make our yes be yes and our no no; to not retaliate; to give to the needy; to be in prayer for one another; to love our enemies ; to not judge others; to not be concerned with material goods, to be the salt and light to the world, to not only not murder but to not let things go unresolved and be angry with one another; to not only not commit adultery but not even have lust in our hearts, the list goes on. This is the way of the narrow gate this is why it is hard because it counter intuitive at times, because it is unpopular and uncomfortable; it requires us to learn humility and selflessness, to be willing to put others above ourselves when our instinct is to strive to put our selves first. It means that we are called daily to pass through this narrow gate and walk a decidedly uneasy road of obeying Christ's commands against anger, lust, divorce, retaliation, hatred, injustice, ostentation, greediness, and so on. Life outside of the loyalty to Jesus Christ is the secular life- the way is easy, the path is wide; it is the gate of whatever pleases you. It is far easier to do what ever we please than to live out what the Sermon on the Mount asks us to do, that is why the gate is narrow and only a few will take the path.

The second set of stories is about two prophets. We are called to be aware of the false prophets- those who appear to be Christian but who are not living out the ways of Christ. These are those people who have claimed Christ, who say the right thing but then lead very different lives. Jesus warns us that we will be able to tell who the false prophets are by their fruit, by what they are producing, by what they are teaching, how they really live and how they present the gospel to others. Jesus warns us that false prophets are those who disguise themselves as sheep that is they seem to be authentic members of Christ's flock, but the discordance between their profession and their practice reveals that they are really "wolves." Their words and their life are incongruent with each other. Jesus tells us

that we will be able to recognize these folks by the fruit they produce. This fruit isn't a track record of how many converts a person makes, rather do they point to Jesus Christ. Does a person point to Christ's truth as found in the scriptures or do they water down the gospel and say "it doesn't really matter all that much what you believe as long as you are a good person." False prophets are often those who seem like they are doing it right but often are the ones who are out for their own glory, out for prestige, power and for the limelight. They are often great at pointing out the faults of others and preaching the correct words but who often fail to take an introspective look at their own life and hold their own lives against the standards of the Christ's gospel. In other words they say "Christ is a good teacher but not God," Christ is only one way to the Father and not THE way;"; they say "forgive" but fail to forgive; they say "give to those who are less fortunate" but then fail to help a friend in need; they say "we welcome all people to our community" but then make it so uncomfortable for someone who is different to feel welcomed and incorporated into the community that that person leaves; they say "sure we need to take care of those who can't care for themselves: the children, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the sick because that is what Christ tells us we should do but then they block programs, money and laws that would help those who can't fight for themselves;" they say that it is all relative anyways and what you believe is good for you and not, believe in Christ who is Lord" these are the people who are wolves in sheep clothing.

Jesus demands more of us than a watered down faith. Christ wants us to make our lives so focused on him that we are striving to live out his message to heal the wounded, care for the orphaned, give to the poor, fight for the those who can't fight for themselves, to cloth those in need, feed the hungry, throw away the temptations towards lusting after another's spouse; seeking to get rid of our greediness, selfishness and work towards healing and wholeness for each other. Christ wants his people to learn to put our values into practice. It would be like a parent who wants their children to learn to be polite and respectful of others and so they teach them how to say please, thank you, and tell them to always be kind and then the parent goes to the grocery store clerk and in front of their child starts to yell and be disrespectful and in a moment goes against everything they have been telling their own child to do and be. Or a person who says stealing is wrong but then turns around and takes things from their office justifying it that their company owes it to them. The fruit we bear is born out during the everyday occurrences in our life. Earl Palmer in his book "The Enormous Exception" writes: It is the practical day-to-day values lived out that leave the greater mark upon a child growing up. It is the drive to school, the rainy day at home, the duties of an ordinary twenty-four hour cycle in which we catch from one another the real values by which we live and make decisions" (p137). It is possible to serve and even to glorify Christ and yet in one's own personal life not obey him. It isn't enough to just say we are Christians we have to live it out everyday in real and tangible ways. We all fall short and none of us are ever going to be perfect and accomplish living obediently in Christ's word all the time but there is a difference in those who try and those who just proclaim the words. The false prophets are the ones who have all the right words but never live out their faith. Christianity for them is merely words and beliefs it isn't practice. We at times all can be the false prophets and we at times can follow false prophets, the only thing we can do is to build our foundation on

Christ. It is then that we turn to the third story to that of the two houses, the house built on the solid rock and the one on shifting sand.

In this last story we have a call to action. We are called to build our life on the foundation of Christ. We have a choice to build our homes on Christ or to build our lives on the things of this world, to walk toward the narrow gate that leads to life; or follow the path that is the world that leads to destruction. In every moment and aspect of our lives we are building, we are each a house builder. Each of us are building our philosophy of life, establishing our values, and choosing who and what we build our foundations of faith on. To build our lives on Christ means our faith will not crumble when the storms of life hit us. None of us will be spared hardships in life, none of us will be able to say that life is simple and easy and always wonderful. Many of us are in a place right now of hardship, we are worrying about finances, about our job or finding a job, about how to be a good son/daughter to an aging parent, how to be a good parent; how to love that person in our family that drives us crazy; or how to rebuild a relationship that seems to be beyond repair; we worry about a child who is struggling in school or how to help a friend who has cancer or is suffering from depression. These are the storms of life that beat against our homes; these are the storms that make us question and wonder and cry out to God. If we build our homes on the hope and person of Christ then we will have a strong foundation that can help us in those storms, if however we build our lives on material goods on the values of our secular world then when the storms come our homes are swept away. Let's look at a few pictures that will help give us a visual. There is a Christian song called "Shifting Sand" by a group called Caedmon's call. Listen to these words: "Sometimes I believe all the lies, so I can do the things I should despise; and every day I am swayed by whatever is on my mind." When we build our house on sand this is how we live our life, swayed by what ever is on our minds, swayed by how we feel in the moment, swayed by what is going right or wrong in our life; swayed by things that give us temporary comfort instead of trusting in Christ who will help us through it all.. The chorus of the song goes "my faith is like shifting sand, changed by every wave; my faith is like shifting sand, so I stand on grace."

In each of these stories Christ is calling us to get rid of what is false within our own hearts and to follow after him. In our passage this morning we are called to examine our lives; to ask ourselves- are we choosing the narrow gate, are we following Christ's footsteps or are we living in the world, following the wide gate. How does our life present the Gospel, do we point to Christ daily or are we ourselves a false prophet saying all the right words but living in an opposite manner? Are we daily building our life on the firm foundation or the shifting sand? The warnings in this passage remind us that few will choose the hard way of faith; few will choose to go the way of costly discipleship. So the question we are left with today is this: will you choose the narrow gate, will you strive to follow Christ and point to him alone, will you fall on the grace of Christ and seek his love and forgiveness for those times we fail; will you daily strive to life as a faithful witness to the Gospel of Christ building your house of faith on the Firm Foundation or Shifting Sand?