

November 2, 2008  
The National Presbyterian Church

## The Teacher Makes the Difference

Matthew 7:24-29

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I feel deeply honored to be your preacher here today and to be able to stand in this pulpit and to preach to this wonderful congregation. I have many warm memories about The National Presbyterian Church. In the 1980s, I came to speak at a retreat out in Chesapeake Bay and that had to be the most unforgettable retreat I ever spoke at because the pastor of this church, Louis Evans, and his beautiful wife, Coke, came to the airport and met me at Dulles Airport and then I was a passenger on their plane as they flew us to the retreat. In fact, I was talking to Coke yesterday and we reminisced about that trip because Lou loved to fly and he said, "I just loved doing this." We landed on an airstrip without a tower or anything. There were telephone poles and wires around, I remembered that, but we negotiated those and landed on this little airstrip and then went to the conference.

And then when Craig Barnes was pastor here, I was present for a second retreat and mission's conference. What a great congregation and I feel so honored that you've invited me to be a resident preacher here for these months. It's just exciting. I have a text for you, a powerful text. It's from the Sermon on the Mount. Let me share with you the setting of this great text. Every rabbi was expected to give a commentary on the law. That was expected of Jesus too.

Jesus as a rabbi was expected to give a commentary on the law. The Talmud is a commentary on the law. A large part of the Dead Sea Scrolls are commentaries on the law. So they expected our Lord to do that, and he did it in

a section of Scripture we called the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, 6, and 7. Jesus starts the sermon with the word-- "blessing." Psalm 1, the great law song begins with a blessing. "Blessed is the man or woman that walks not on the way of wickedness, but walks in the way of the law of the Lord, the Torah of the Lord." Jesus started his sermon just like Psalm 1 with a blessing, except he notes nine blessings, and the nine blessings we called the beatitudes. And then he boldly states, "Think not that I've come to destroy the law. I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it." What a bold thing for Jesus to say. "I have come to fulfill the law." And then the Sermon on the Mount unfolds as our Lord takes hold of the law, makes promises. In fact, what's great about the Sermon on the Mount is the teacher of the sermon. That's why I've entitled the sermon today "The Teacher Makes the Difference". Then when Jesus comes to the end of the sermon, he ends with a parable, the same parable that ends Psalm 1. And I think that's intentional because Psalm 1 also ends with this parable, "The wicked are like chaff that blows away in the wind, but the righteous are like a tree planted by the rivers of the water that bear fruit." Our Lord ends the Sermon on the Mount with the same parable but improves it. He changes it a little bit and the result is a very dramatic parable to end the Sermon on the Mount.

And that's the text that I decided for us today and for you, for me. It's a good text for Communion Sunday because we're focusing on the teacher who makes the difference. It's a wise text for where we are at in our culture, in our time. This is an election week. It's a terribly important time where we're making decisions right now. And this is a parable about deciding too. But here is the way our Lord ends the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter 7 of Matthew 24,

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man or woman who built his house upon the rock, and the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man or woman who built his house upon the sand. And the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell. And great was the fall of it.*

That ends the Sermon on the Mount. And then Matthew makes this comment, "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one who had authority and not like

their scribes.” This is the word of the Lord. Let’s pray together. Lord, may the words in my mouth, the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Lord be our teacher today. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Well, Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount with a parable. It’s really the same parable that ends Psalm 1, only it’s more dramatic. And in the parable, there are two stories told side-by-side, just like in Psalm 1. Some of our Lord’s greatest parables are two-story parables. The most famous of all, the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother, two stories told side by side. And so what we need to do in these two story parables is to look at the elements of the story that are the same in each story and the elements that are different in each story, and that’s how we gain insight into what our Lord is teaching us in this parable.

In this parable, there are two stories told side by side. Notice what is the same in both stories. Each person in the story builds a house. We are all house builders. This is not a parable about some who choose to build a house and some who choose not to build a house. No, this is a parable that says everybody builds a house. Everybody has a philosophy of life that they live in, and maybe that’s the house. And everyone does that. Even non-decisions, because this parable is also about making decisions, even a non-decision builds a house and then we live in that non-house.

If you were trying to decide, should I turn out for a sporting event if I was in college and they had a spring walk-ons where I could join the team? Should I try or shouldn’t I try to be on the team? Should I try out for this musical that the college or high school is having? Should I try out or not try out? I can’t make up my mind. I can’t make up my mind. I get down to Friday night, the cutoff is Saturday, I can’t make up my mind. I can’t. Well, now Saturday comes and I didn’t try out. Well, did you make up your mind? For sure, you’re not going to be in that show. That’s for sure. When fall comes and the curtain goes up you’re not there, you’re not on the team, so you live in the non-house you built.

Even non-decisions make a house I have to live in. And that’s the way the parable starts. Everybody builds a house, wise people, foolish people, we all build houses. So that’s the same in both stories. Another thing that’s the same in both stories is that each house has a storm. It’s interesting our Lord repeats the same words twice. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew

and beat on that house. And then he repeats it, the second house. The rains fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on that house. I don't think Jesus is implying that all storms are identical. They're not, but every house faces a storm.

So, again, that's not a variable. That stays the same in both stories. That means that this parable is not going to be a parable about weather. This parable is not a parable about, "Be sure you find the place to build your house where there are no storms." Now, we're not so sure we like that part of the parable. It's a little bit like Matthew 13 where our Lord told a similar parable about a man who planted a huge field of wheat.

And then a few days later, weeds are coming up among the wheat. And so the workers come to the owner in the parable and say, "Didn't you plant wheat." "Yes, I did, I planted wheat." "Well, there are weeds growing up with the wheat." And then in the parable our Lord has the owner say, "An enemy has done this!" Then the workers say, "Well then, what should we do? We'll pull all the weeds up now? They're a different height. We can do it now." And then the surprise of the parable. In Our Lord's parables, there's always a surprise. And the surprise is, "No let the weeds and the wheat grow together." This is not a parable we particularly like. Nobody wants to raise our children in among the weeds. Nobody wants to pick a place to live where there are a lot of weeds.

So we would rather have a parable on, "Yes, pull the weeds up so we have a proper and safe place for the wheat to grow." But instead, Jesus surprises us and says, "No, let them grow together and then in the harvest we'll separate them." Ah, that means the wheat is going to have to grow with the weeds. We're not happy about that and we're always trying to find the perfect place to live where there are no weeds. And yet there are always weeds. Even if we home-school our youth then we're the weeds. You can't get away from the weeds. They're always there. And so that's a parable about raising wheat that can stand to grow up around weeds.

Here's a parable about building a house that can withstand storms because there are always storms. That's in the parable. Then what's the variable? Well, the first variable in the parable is described by two things. First, the foundation where we build the house. Is it a rock or is it sand? And secondly, the permanence of the foundation "those who hear these words of mine and do them build it on a rock. Those who hear these words of mine and don't do them build their house on the sand." So, the variable is the permanence of the foundation.

The second variable is the choice that we have between “hear” and “do.” I’m intrigued about that gap, because there is a gap that Jesus preserves in this parable. He does it in many parables, between “those who hear these words of mine” and then noticed the gap, and “do them.” There’s a period of time. This makes this parable a freedom parable. A little bit like elections, our freedom moment in a democracy. A freedom moment we have between “hear” and “do,” between “hear” and “vote,” between “hear” and “build” the house, we have that gap. And so this is a freedom parable as well.

Well, notice today then what Jesus is affirming in this parable. There’s no question this is a messianic parable. The whole Sermon on the Mount is profoundly messianic. We see it when our Lord begins his sermon by saying, “Think not that I’ve come to destroy the law, I have come to fulfill the law.” What a bold thing to say. And this parable is bold. Jesus is boldly affirming that his words are faithful and true. Here is a safe place to build your house, to build your life, to build your identity upon. His words, his character that backs up those words, and so this parable is profoundly messianic. It’s a truth parable. It’s a parable about the truth and the durability and the faithfulness of the teacher. There is no mistake about that.

And notice that people notice it. Matthew himself makes the comment, that the people were stunned by the authority of the teacher as he ended the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, our Lord poses a great question in this parable. And the big question it seems to me is this, “If I do not choose to build my life upon the foundation of the teacher who’s speaking this parable, if I do not choose to build my life upon the faithfulness and the character and the integrity of Jesus Christ, then what do I propose to build my life on?” And notice that this parable stirs us up to ask that question, If I do not choose--and notice, our choice is preserved in the parable between “hear” and “do”--if I do not choose to build my life upon this foundation, then what do I choose to build my life upon?

Our Lord has given two criteria for evaluating the foundation. First, is it true? What is the truth quotient? The truth factor? Is it true? Is it faithful? Do I dare trust him? And two, can whatever foundations I choose, withstand storms? Because there are storms, for every house. If I do choose something else to build my life on, can it withstand storms? Let’s reflect on that. Think of some of the choices that we can make in the building of our house.

Right now, in our culture I think, certainly in my generation, one of the main foundations upon which houses have been built, lives have been built,

identity has been built, has been on careers. Our career, my career, your career, what I choose as a career becomes often the foundation on which I build my life. So much is dependent upon getting ready for that career. Taking the bar exam or taking the MCATs or doing all the various things I do to get that foundation established so I can build my house.

Supposing I was a commercial jet pilot and I went through all the training and I became certified as commercial airline captain--actually became a captain. Supposing I choose a fine airline like United Airlines. I become a captain. I fly the 747 which is the top of the line, and maybe I'm getting ready for the new Boeing 787 which will even be better, or if I work for a different airline, I might fly the 380, the top of the line Airbus and I am qualified to fly that, and that means I fly these wonderful exotic routes to other countries, not just the short express routes, I get to fly the major routes. And I've earned my way to that. That is a tremendous career. It's a tremendous thing to build my life on, and I have a lot to show for it.

Then one day, this happens. I'm going to check in for the 747 flight to Narita. Okay, just ready to go. Hey, here's the United Airlines nurse. She's here every now and then, just routine, blood pressure check, no big deal. And so you come up, roll up your sleeve. She puts this little machine on, and then she says, you know, "This machine doesn't work just right today, I want to try the other arm." That is not a good sign, folks. When they want to change arms, that's not good--she's trying to put you at peace, but that's not a good sign and she will make a comment, "You know, it's not working just right. Let's try the other arm." Then she says this: "You know, John, I'm very sorry but you've got a 190/110. You can't fly today. In fact, you may never fly again." How's that for a storm? That's a little storm. That's not even a big storm. With high blood pressure, you feel great. That's the thing about hypertension. You feel so good. But they don't think so. "I'm sorry, you can't fly. You could be in Public Relations for United and give talks to high school kids on becoming pilots, but you can't fly anymore." This entire career upon which you're building your house, you mean 190/110 and that's the end of it? It seems so unfair. It's such a small storm, or supposing it's a very small mental illness storm.

Supposing you're a pilot flying into my city, Seattle, and you're in the friendly skies and you're giving just a little pep talk to the people because you like to make them feel real good as they're flying in. And as you're flying into Seattle, you say, "Folks, we're about ready to land. We hope you had a nice flight. We know you have a choice of carriers, but we're glad you chose

our carrier. And by the way, just a little bonus for you today look out at the left side of the plane, you can see Mount Fuji and notice the mountaineers. They're climbing actually up the mountain if you take a good close look. And now we're landing in Seattle. We're glad you're here." People have gotten notepads out there writing letters to United Airlines. They say, "This pilot, there's something strange about this pilot. He told us we were seeing Mount Fuji outside the airplane. It should be Mount Rainier." That's just a little bit of mental illness, just a little geographical confusion. Now, that's all right for some professions, but not for an airplane pilot. Imagine, who wants an airplane pilot with just a little bit of mental illness? Your career is over for such a small storm.

That's such a small storm, who cares? Small. Think of other worthy possible foundations too. What about the person who says, "I'm building my life upon my family. My family is my foundation, certainly not my career." And so I worship my family. I put so much onto my family. They give meaning to my life. My kids give meaning to my life. But the fact is that kids can't do that. It's asking too much from your children. It's asking too much from your parents to confer meaning to your life.

You know, the family is a wonderful house. It's not a good foundation. A career is wonderful house, but not a good foundation. The church is a wonderful house, that's what we call the house of the Lord, not a foundation. Jesus Christ is the foundation. And a democratic national election is a wonderful house; it's not a good foundation. You can't build on that. You build your life on something more substantial, something that can endure an election that goes either way, can endure storms, and families have huge storms that sometimes hit a family, even death itself, but a family worshipping itself cannot handle that storm. Jesus Christ can. That's what our Lord has done in his parable. He's asked us to test what is the foundation upon which we build and can it withstand storms.

Blaise Pascal is one of my heroes; he lived in the 17th century. He was a physicist, a mathematician, and he was a Christian. He wrote thoughts down and his sister collected his thoughts and put them together to become one of the classic books of Western civilization, *The Pensées*, *The Thoughts of Pascal*. And most of the thoughts had to do with the Christian faith, most of the thoughts in *The Pensées* are his attempt to try to explain and help people understand the Christian faith, and believe it. Here is one of those thoughts. He said, "To win people to Christian faith", Pascal wrote, "We must show that our faith is not contrary to reason. We must show that it's venerable so that it will inspire respect."<sup>1</sup> By, "venerable," he means that if you were to

believe it, it would have a good effect in your life. In other words, it would be a house that could withstand storms. He continues “We must show that it’s venerable to inspire respect for it. And then we must show that at its center is love.” That’s what we’re celebrating today in the Lord’s Supper. At the center of the Sermon on the Mount is the love of Christ who invites us to come to him, the one who fulfills the law. So we must show that at the center is love. And I love this line from Pascal, “So that good men, good women will hope it’s true. And then we must show that it’s true.”

How do you discover the truth of Christ? How do we discover it? When we see the character of Christ unfold and his integrity wins us, wins our respect first, and then our faith as we put our weight down on his promises, but that’s how he ends his Sermon on the Mount. “Those who hear these words of mine and do them are wise. They have built their life on a rock. The rains come for sure but the house stands because it was founded on the rock.”

Heavenly Father, thank you for that. Thank you for that promise. Thank you that we can claim that promise on this Communion Sunday. We can claim it on this Communion of Saints Sunday, too, with gratitude for those who have built their lives on the rock. So Lord, bless us, and may we build our lives on the rock. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensées*. Number 187

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*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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