

Jesus the Foundation
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
July 14, 2024 AM Sermon
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Matthew 7:24-29, 1 Corinthians 3:10-17

On June 24, 2021, the early morning quiet was suddenly pierced by collapsing concrete, shattering glass, and the rhythmic blare of fire alarms. A debris cloud materialized where twelve floors of condos had once stood. Within twelve seconds, a building that had sheltered people since the early 1980s was reduced to rubble with residents and pets still inside.

The collapse of the Champlain Towers South condo building outside Miami is among the most devastating accidental building collapses in United States history. A search and rescue operation went on for weeks, finally demobilizing almost a month after the collapse itself. In all, 98 people died and eleven were injured.

Since the condo collapse, investigations have been ongoing to find the cause. While the Surfside condos seem to have collapsed due to a combination of factors, including corrosion and maintenance issues that needed to be addressed, a key factor seems to have been the design of the substructure. The support under the swimming pool deck failed, opening a crater in the building that precipitated other structural failures. Since the collapse, Florida residents and communities have been trying to figure out what needs to be done, and what residents can afford, to ensure that the buildings are safe.

When you hear a story like this, you realize that the shock and tragedy of it commands a response. You cannot hear the stories of the people affected by the Surfside condo collapse while remaining indifferent to the profound loss and its implicit cautionary tale.

We pick up Jesus' words in Matthew 7 this morning on just such a note of caution. Matthew is winding up the first of five teaching sections by Jesus in his gospel, and he has sobering words on the lips of Jesus.

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

With this very startling picture, Jesus is highlighting that his teaching is authoritative. Jesus' listeners cannot remain indifferent to him or to his words. His ministry commands a response. In this short word picture so many of us sang about in Sunday school, Jesus admonishes his first hearers, and us, that what we *do* in response to him matters a whole lot.

But wait, you might say. LaGrave belongs to the Reformed branch of the Christian family. In this community we might get a little twitchy whenever the words “faith” and “works” show up in the same sentence.

If we've grown up in the church, right away we think of the counterexamples: Abraham, who believed God and whose *faith* was credited to him as righteousness. We think of John 3:16: that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever *believes* in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

We believe our faith in Jesus' righteous life, death, and resurrection is both the saving tie and the gift of God's grace in our lives. We have held on for dear life to the one who took hold of us, clothed us in his righteousness, and who presents us in him without blemish and free from accusation. We have been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, for the glory of God alone.

But there are also these “works count so watch out” passages, as one of my former professors called them. These are the passages that cause us to sit up and take notice of how we are cooperating with God in his renovation project, and shining a light on whether we're letting him build in us a life after his own heart.

Here's Paul in the passage we read from 1 Corinthians: “If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.”

Or even more clearly, here's Jesus' brother James: 2: 14 “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?”

So what do we make of these verses? Do we need “faith-in-Jesus” plus? We treasure the verses that invite us all who are weary and burdened to come to Jesus for *rest*. Is faith in him truly different from the competing idolatries that seem insatiable, always calling us to do and be more?

We need only turn back a few pages in Matthew for part of an answer. Matthew 5 starts the sermon that ends with this morning’s passage. And Matthew 5 is incredible news: In the opening Beatitudes, Matthew shows that the kind of people Jesus loves to spend time with are those who know their spiritual bankruptcy, who grieve it, who seek mercy and offer it freely, who bear up under persecution and slander because they value their relationship with Jesus above all else.

And after those opening blessings, Jesus outlines what life in his kingdom looks like. It’s a kingdom both now and yet to come, both impossible to achieve yet able to be received, marked by no entry standard for except for a willingness to come, yet holding up a standard of righteous living even *higher* than the one called for by the Pharisees; a standard only perfectly kept by Jesus himself.

It’s a view of life in the household of the kingdom of heaven. Do you long for a life in this household? In this house that Jesus builds, not only is murder out of the question, even hatred is no more. In this house marriage relationships last, and no spouse, particularly in the ancient world no wife, is dispensable. In this house the carbonated holiness of laughter and trustworthy, straightforward speech makes oaths unnecessary. In this household non-retaliation supersedes retribution; and love for enemies transforms people on both sides into kingdom citizens.

In this house critical feedback across the dinner table is nearly indistinguishable from loving encouragement, offered in humble awareness of the critiquer’s own spiritual need. Here physical needs are met, requests for spiritual sustenance are welcome, and grace upon grace is found to fuel a life that is really life.

This is life in the household of the kingdom. It is breathtaking. If your heart skips to live here, if your eyes well up yearning for this home you’ve visited in snatches, if your mind struggles to understand the practical workings of this kingdom’s strategies, let those very things remind you: you’re not fully home yet. Life in this household of the kingdom makes everything sad, sinful, and isolating seem like a faraway dream.

Because, of course, we’ve made a mess of things here. We might struggle to define the mess, and debate whose fault it is or what it will take to fix them. But the ache in our chests as we face the troubles of this world and the longing we have for another way speaks to our having been made for something else. We’ve been trying to find our way toward it again, ever since God placed cherubim with flashing swords at the entrance to Eden. Oh, how we have missed walking with God in the cool of the day.

For Jesus, for Paul, for James and the other New Testament writers “faith in Jesus” doesn’t mean that we simply agree with a set of doctrines about who Jesus is and go on about our business. As important as doctrines are, that’s not what faith means. Faith in Jesus means building a house to live in with him. It means loving him, delighting to be near him, turning toward the Father through him. It means squaring up the walls and windows of our houses with what he says and who he is for us.

So when Jesus concludes his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount with this dramatic picture, one house battered, weathered, but still standing; the other lifted off its foundation by storm surge and imploding with a terrific crash; he’s not commenting on whether we need “faith-plus” something more to come home to him. No, there’s no fine print in the covenant. But he *is* teaching his hearers that real faith includes real response, real acknowledgment of making our home in his love. In faith we trust him, and we work to cooperate with what he says and what he does.

Hearing and heeding Jesus allows us to build life on the rock of his gracious redemption and direction. This kind of life will not collapse in the storms of life. But if we let Jesus’ words go in one ear and out the other, if we don’t make him our home, we’re building a life on sand.

In our lives we simply will choose one or the other, and when our houses are storm-tested, how we’ve built will become clear. Jesus’ word picture allows us to picture him and his words as the foundation of our individual lives. But Jesus is the foundation of our corporate life as a church. The corporate dimension is addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3.

1 Corinthians 3:10: By the grace God has given me, Paul writes, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ....”

The Corinthian Christians were questioning Paul’s authority as an apostle. They were splintering into factions based on allegiance to particular church leaders. So Paul reminds them: all preachers depend on the gospel, Christ crucified; a story that trips up the Jews and seems purely ludicrous to the Gentiles.

None of the leaders, Paul reminds the church, are themselves the foundation. Each one is only an apprentice to the Master Builder; each one is just a subcontractor, all on the same crew serving in the name of Christ.

So Paul warns the church community to be careful. For they themselves are God’s house, God’s temple. And their work to build on the foundation of Christ can’t branch out on the flimsy support of a leader’s giftedness. It can’t be buttressed by personally defined standards of ethical life. It cannot be propped up by selfishness or pride.

The only solid ground, the only cornerstone for the church is the good news of life in Christ crucified. This foundation, Paul insists, is sound. The church may shake and the windows may rattle, but that foundation isn’t going anywhere. Whatever in the church is not built on Christ will be lost to the winds. Whatever *is* built on Christ will stand on the day of God’s inspection.

In the temple for God’s dwelling that is the community of LaGrave Church, we are seeking to build together on the foundation of the good news of Christ crucified. Together we work on committees and projects, lead children and youth, ponder our past and our future, love and build each other up in the name of Christ and in the manner of Christ, for the glory of Christ. This is the ground on which we stand.

We ask God to continually establish us on the foundation of his gospel story, to help us ground ourselves and our tasks on this unshakeable foundation. And we ask God to show us how to be a household in his name as the Spirit enables us to envision it, so that our work together will not be in vain.

Yet no matter how well-grounded our work, no matter how carefully we build, we acknowledge that the work all belongs to God. That’s why we have an unfinished, open-work steeple on the top of our building, to remind us that the work of the gospel is always ongoing and outlasts us.

We’re not the first ones to realize this. St. Thomas Aquinas is a theologian and philosopher of the church of the 13th century. His enormous life work, the *Summa Theologica* is unfinished, but its five volumes and several thousand pages presents the reasoning behind nearly every point of doctrine in the church of his time.

But three months before his death at the age of about 50, tradition holds that Aquinas had a glimpse into eternity. Whatever he saw of God’s glory or Jesus’ majesty so affected him that he resolved never to write again. When his friend and secretary Reginald encouraged Thomas to pick up his pen again, he said. “I can write no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems to me as so much straw.”

Straw. A 800-year-old theological work still studied today is straw in comparison with the beauty and glory of God...

There’s a kind of grace in a vision of God’s glory that throws into sharp relief our human limitation. We fragile creatures see through a glass darkly. We construct as we know to construct, ever seeking Christ our foundation and only hope, who alone can make our work sing of God. We build on the foundation as best we know to build. And we trust that the God who created this world and redeemed it in love will establish his kingdom without end in the light of the life of the Son.

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