

LIVING FAITH

Psalm 46
Matthew 7: 21-29

Faith Community
June 2, 2002

Introduction

In a heated discussion about religion, a person makes a frequently heard comment: “There are people who don’t even believe in God who live better lives than some supposedly devout Christians. I’d rather be with a kind atheist than an ordained priest who molests children.”

A hostage was captured and held in isolation. For months he didn’t see anyone but those who were holding him captive. He spent long days in his cell with nothing to do and no one to talk to. As he sat in his cell he prayed fervently. Eventually there came a time when he was even able to pray for his captors. After he was released he said that it was only because of his faith that he was able to survive with his sanity intact.

I

Jesus tells of a man who built his house on sandy soil. He created a nice house, well constructed, and beautiful. After a while a fierce storm struck. It hit the house and almost immediately the walls began to crack, then give way. The roof fell in. Within minutes that whole impressive house came tumbling down.

It didn’t have any foundation under it. There was nothing to hold it up. Without a firm foundation, the rest of the house just crumbled.

When we were in Brazil we learned that in many places the Brazilians drill holes twenty-five feet deep and fill them with concrete when they are building the foundation for a house. In some areas there are huge anthills in the ground, which will cave in if they don’t drill the holes deep enough. So when they begin the footings for a foundation they first drill several of these support holes, which are tied into the footings.

On the other hand my family built a cabin in the backwoods of Ohio where the soil is almost solid rock. We didn’t put in any foundation at all – we just built on the rock – and the place hasn’t shifted in the least.

II

That’s what Jesus’ second illustration is about. Another man built his house on rock. The winds blew, the rain poured, the storms beat against it but it was unmoved because it was built on rock. This house had a solid foundation, which was unmovable.

Jesus says everyone who hears my words - and acts on them - is like that wise man who built his house on the rock. It’s not just a question of hearing, but hearing and acting.

III

We build our faith by being obedient. We grow as Christians by being faithful. We are able to mature in faith by practicing faith. How does an athlete get ready for a game? By doing

calisthenics; by learning the plays, by working with the team; by going to practices everyday. By practicing over and over we strengthen ourselves both physically and mentally. Oh, we will still make mistakes – even the greatest athletes make mistakes – but we’ll make far fewer mistakes if we’ve practiced consistently.

How do we build muscles? By going to the weight room and lifting weights. We start off small, then add more, and before long we are lifting more than we ever thought we could. We build muscles by using them over and over again. By lifting against that resistance we get stronger.

How do you become a tuba player? You take some lessons so that you know what the notes mean, and you learn the configurations of the keys, and then you warn the neighbors to move out for an extended period of time while you practice, practice, practice.

How do you become a good tennis player? You take some lessons to learn how to hold the racket for a forehand and a backhand shot, you learn where to stand on the court, and some of the strategies. Then, you go out and practice, practice, practice.

How do you and I develop as Christians? We learn what Jesus taught, we learn what’s in the Bible, then we practice it, and practice it, and practice it everyday. There will be plenty of resistance, but each time we come up against it we will get stronger.

IV

Do you want to be a stronger Christian? Offer genuine caring to other people – and not just the people you like relatives, neighbors and friends, (although they can be challenging enough at times!) but the colleague at work who’s abrasive, difficult, and hard to get along with. Show compassion to the person who has AIDS, and the neglected woman in the smelly nursing home. Care for the people it’s easier not to care for.

Do you want to be a stronger Christian? Worship God. We come here to see friends, to talk with other people, to make new friends. We come to be inspired, to help build our faith. One of the ways we can build that faith is to worship God. Come to the place where we can be in the presence of God and say, “Thank you,” to God every week. That thankfulness, that worship, keeps our lives in perspective and deepens our faith.

Want to be a stronger Christian? Actively help the disadvantaged. This is so important that Jesus said “Whenever you care for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it for me.” To serve food to a homeless person is like giving a warm meal to a hungry Christ.

Jesus offers us examples of what he means – the hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, and the prisoners. So maybe we can help with a Habitat house, or adopt a child through Christian Children's Fund, or become involved with Bread for the World. We can help with a homeless shelter, a food bank, or by sending clothing overseas. We can support a center for people who have been abused. There are literally hundred's of opportunities. Involvement with even one can help develop your faith.

Do you want to be a stronger Christian? Spend some private time with God. Set aside some time each day to read the Bible, pray, and listen for what God may be saying in your life.

Do you want to be a stronger Christian? Tithe to God's work. For some people this is the most difficult of all. They can forgive enemies, sacrifice their time, love the unlovable, but when it comes to writing a bigger check each week, they suddenly freeze.

Supporting the ministries of God both here and around the world helps develop our faith in two ways:

- 1) You give to help build important Christian ministries that serve people in need.
- 2) You grow because you give part of what you have. Especially in our culture, to be able to part with money because you are committed builds deeper Christian faith.

Setting aside a percent of our income is part of what it means to be Christian. The Bible tells us ten percent.

Even if there were no needs in the world it would still be important to give to God's causes, because giving in itself is an act of Christian growth. Giving back to God strengthens our faith.

Conclusion

What I'm saying here is a positive variation on the words of Forrest Gump. Christian is as a Christian does.

I received a letter in the mail two or three weeks ago from a member of our congregation. It was after I had given a sermon on the twenty-third Psalm.

In the letter the man wrote about how much that Psalm meant to him. He memorized it as a child in Sunday school along with several other passages. He wrote that they thought they were just learning these words to get a children's book or a Bible. But he came back to that Psalm and many of the other verses again and again in his life. He wrote about repeating those passages to himself when he was on night patrol in Viet Nam, and while he moved along a convoy from the Mekong Delta to Saigon.

Those verses - just a few sentences each - said over and over when he was a child, came back to support him in a time of serious need. Because he had learned how it went, because he had practiced his faith, he was becoming stronger all the time, even when he didn't realize it.

In those moments of crisis he could be strong because he had prepared himself. All along he was building his house on the rock.

The foundation we live on is the one we are building every day. Thank God that Christ has given us a foundation of rock.

Amen.