

Thomas R. Cook  
Sermon #476 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, PA  
8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 1, 2008

## **“Foundation”**

Scripture: Matthew 7:21-29; 3 Pentecost A, Proper 4 (Revised Common Lectionary)

*Seventy thousand.* Seventy thousand houses destroyed in a matter of seconds, and this, mind you, by an aftershock some two weeks following the great earthquake that struck China on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2008. Some relief organizations put the total number of houses destroyed well over a half million; others suggest the number will ultimately settle somewhere in the millions. Potentially millions of houses toppled to the ground, shattered and lying in ruins, taken down by mere minutes of quivering, undulating earth. And are we to believe that in these thousands, perhaps even millions of homes, not one rested upon rock, not one was founded upon the hard, steady, and dependable surface of the earth? No doubt it was undependable shifting sand that lay beneath so many of these structures, but none built upon rock? Not one of these fallen houses, even in the cities, engineered for just those crucial, terrifying moments of terrestrial uncertainty, rested on rock?

Look, I understand Jesus' admonition to be wise, to build our houses on a firm foundation to withstand the elements, to guard against the winds and waters and forces that threaten what we make. I understand his analogy to a life of faith in God, his admonition to build our lives upon that solid rock of faith in order to withstand the threats that would

topple our souls. But what does it mean when you build a decent house upon the stable rock, and even then, the powers that be so overwhelm all we might do to guard against them, that the earth itself beneath our feet no longer provides the stability we need to live in security and contentment? The enormous power of the earth in uncontrolled motion is able to shatter even our best laid human structures, even those that stand upon rock. So what happens when we feel the quaking, shaking movement of the foundations of our faith right there beneath our feet?

I think you know of what I speak. How often people have approached me to ask how we might still believe in God in a time when war and disaster and disease seem so mercilessly rampant in the world, at a time when churches like our own Anglican Communion spill our unsettling divorces all over a hungry global media market which seems to delight in the quaking spiritual earth under our feet, at a time when the best ideals of our nation ---ideals of liberty, tolerance, the right to privacy and an equitable, sustainable economy--- seem under siege, when religious practice is replaced by so much religious entertainment and the relevance of Jesus' teachings of sacrifice and service to others is buried under the pursuit of self-interest in both secular and religious endeavors. What rock is beneath us any longer upon which to build? Upon what stable area can we stand? Where can we rest... assured?

I want us to understand that these questions are not ours alone. Don't you know they

also belonged to Jesus and to the people who followed him? What rock was beneath the feet of the Israelites of Jesus time? Wasn't it the rock of Rome, that overwhelmingly sophisticated, but crude and cruel, empire that decided the fate of Jesus and his people? What stability did they have in a time when Roman soldiers wandered their ancient streets, when thousands of Jews were dispatched to crosses upon the whim of sadistic Roman governors who ruthlessly suppressed any decent to their rule and who wouldn't let the people forget that, like it or not, the Roman emperor was among the gods? Where was the unifying foundation to be found when the Pharisees thought the nation should worship God in one way, the Sadducees in another, the Essenes withdrawn into the desert and waiting for the miraculous deliverance by a messiah, the Zealots practicing terror and attacking their Roman overlords whenever possible, fomenting horrendous reprisals upon the ordinary citizens of the land?

What I am trying to say is that when Jesus speaks of a life of faith, when he talks of building ---wisely building--- one's house upon the rock, he does so with the full knowledge of what it feels like to live in uncertain times, when no tings feels entirely stable, when even the cultural and religious rock beneath our feet feels as though it moves. Some forces are too strong to be overlooked and our best efforts cannot always withstand their destructive power. The houses we build come down.

Doesn't mean we shouldn't practice that ancient wisdom of building upon a firm

foundation. And maybe we should consider not only what we build our houses upon, but with what we construct them. With what do we build and strengthen our lives?

The ones who enter the Kingdom of Heaven, teaches Jesus... essentially, the ones who dwell in the abiding presence of God, who are nurtured and assured and strengthened and uplifted by that faith and power and presence, are the ones, he says, "...who do the will of my father in heaven." The ones who hear Jesus' words, and who not only hear but "act on them", are like the wise one whose house has a foundation that does not shift at the first sign of stormy weather.

And what is that will of the father? What are Jesus' words upon which we are to act? I can only believe that in the end they are these: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and love others as you love yourself.* Upon these two commandments, says Jesus, depend all other things. Yet it's this "loving others as we love ourselves" thing that can be the real challenge. Simply put, I believe it means this: where we would hope for peace for ourselves, we must hope and act for the same for others. Where we would work for well-being and prosperity for us and our children, we must work for well-being and prosperity for others. We are called to love: not the noun here, but the verb. "*The one who hears these words of mine and acts on them...*" No wonder such a house must be built upon the firm rock of love; it must withstand the storms of temptation calling us to serve ourselves at the expense of others. If our lives draw us nearer this truth, that love is the necessary

foundation and the necessary ingredient of what we build in this life, then not one part is lived in vain, though the ground beneath us shake and move, though our houses sometimes fall. As quaint as our society may perceive it, the word Jesus uses is “love.” Not power, not money, not prophecy, not success. Love.

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For some twenty years, Chris Hedges covered war as a journalist, living in some of the most violent and war-torn societies on earth. From this experienced point of view, I close with the following words from Chris:

*To survive as a human being is possible only through love. And, when Thanatos is ascendant, the instinct must be to reach out to those we love, to see in the all the divinity, pity, and pathos of the human. And to recognize love in the lives of others ---even those with whom we are in conflict--- love that is like our own. It does not mean that we will avoid war or death. It does not mean that we as distinct individuals will survive. But love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives us meaning that endures. It alone allows us to embrace and cherish life. Love has power both to resist in our nature what we know we must resist, and to affirm what we know we must affirm.\**

And as the apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthian Church: “Love never ends.”

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\* Chris Hedges, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 2003), 184-185. “Thanatos” refers to the instinct or impulse to destruction, violent aggression, and the power of death.