

Strong Foundations

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

July 28, 2024

Text: Luke 6:46-49

Today's text from Luke's Gospel is one of the more well known of Jesus' parables. It's not a "kingdom parable," the kind that usually begin with Jesus saying "the Kingdom of Heaven is like ..." No, this parable is more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the way that he most wanted people to be. He wanted to know that people – his disciples and just regular people who came to hear him preach and teach – were actually listening to what he was saying. That they were paying attention. And that they were making the effort to take his teachings about God to heart so that what he was saying could actually be transformative for them in the ways he knew they could be. In that, Jesus is just like every other teacher, every other preacher, myself included, and every biblical prophet for that matter. Jesus wanted to know that all his efforts would, in the final analysis, make a difference.

We don't tend to think about Jesus in that way, especially when we focus more on the divine view of Jesus as the miraculous Christ. But Jesus was very human too, and this is the Jesus who touches and transforms my heart. This is the Jesus who is speaking in today's text from Luke. This is the human Jesus who is frustrated that people do not seem to understand what it is he is teaching them about what God expects from God's Beloved people. "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" he says. Then he tells this parable to explain the difference between just listening to his teachings and allowing oneself to be transformed by them. He does this using the analogy of a man building a house. In Luke's version of this parable, one man builds a house which is strong enough to withstand storms because it was built on rock and had a strong foundation. In

Matthew's version of this same parable, one man builds a house on rock and the other builds a house on sand. The house built on rock withstands the storms, but the one built on sand does not. I confess to liking Luke's version better because in Luke's version, both houses have a foundation. The difference was that one had a very strong foundation – the one that survived the storms – and the other one also had a foundation, but not a strong one. The one with the poor foundation collapsed when the storms came and “great was the ruin of that house.”

I admit this parable took on a new and deeper meaning to me when I became your pastor here and came to understand what it meant to live and work in a coastal area where storms have the potential to become legendary – and deadly. I remember talking with Laura Dawley who lived through the 1938 hurricane to hear her first hand account of what that was like. I can't even imagine what she went through, with little baby Sally in tow! And then, later on in that first year I was here, we had our own storm experience when Hurricane Sandy blew through our area in September 2012 with a five foot storm surge that wrecked the beaches and destroyed businesses and properties down on the beach. I remember that well! I will forever remember my first trip back to the church after the storm had passed by. I had no idea what kind of damage we had sustained since power was out and cell service was still spotty. I turned the corner off of Wheeler onto Pequot Trail and saw the church still standing. I literally burst into tears. Our beautiful cross window was still intact and leaks in the building were not that much out of the ordinary. I considered it a miracle then, even more so when only a few short years later we discovered that very same window was held in place only by rapidly rotting wood. Truly God was with us in that moment, and so many more, before and since.

This storm aftermath was much on my mind this past week, as I was pondering this upcoming sermon. Perhaps that is why when I left the Clipper Apple Rehab after visiting Charlotte, I turned right instead of left so I could take a drive along Atlantic Avenue. Usually I go nowhere near the beach during the summer, but Thursday was a gray day threatening rain so I figured the beach wouldn't be too busy. And it wasn't. As I drove down Langworthy getting closer and closer to the beaches area, I noticed how the construction of the homes changed, the closer to the beach they were. Many are now built on mammoth stilts, some sort of foundation still underneath with the main living areas well above storm surge range – or so goes the theory. The stilt foundation construction will theoretically allow storm surge to pass underneath the houses, causing minimal damage. But as I drove along, witnessing these stilt houses and the other behemoth beach houses still hugging the sand, I wondered about how any of them would stand against a direct hit from a Category 5 hurricane.

Once upon a time, the chances of that happening were not too high but in this age of global warming, that is no longer the case. And what would happen then? Sand is no foundation for withstanding such a storm. We don't need Matthew's Gospel to tell us that. Nor are stilts. Yet, those houses stand proudly on the dunes, with their commanding beach views and sandy front yards enjoyed by just a very few people for only a brief time each summer. Meanwhile, the homeless communities around the United States are being displaced from what little self-created housing they have found as state and local governments take full advantage of a recent Supreme Court ruling that essentially says the homeless have no protections from being forcibly removed from public spaces. Exactly where they are supposed to go instead is an inconvenient question no one seems to be serious about answering. As I drove down Atlantic Avenue, I found

myself wondering if the folks in those big houses ever thought about the homeless families we have right here in Westerly or back in their home communities in Manhattan or wherever it is they come from. I'm guessing they don't give them a second thought. Why would they? Their stilts and wealth will protect them from such a fate. They hope. I can't help wondering if that hope is in vain.

Foundations matter when it comes to building a home, or any building really. The foundation is what the house is built upon. If the foundation is poorly constructed or cracks or otherwise becomes damaged, the entire structure of the home is in danger of collapse. What I don't get and have been amazed to see on some of the HGTV home renovation shows Peter and I have watched is that some of the houses in the South actually do not have foundations, per se. They are built from the floor up, resting on cinder blocks at key points, acting as foundation. Honestly, I don't get this. It would seem to me that this would allow all sorts of critters to create their own homes under your home. And it seems like it would be so unsteady. On the other hand, this form of construction allows the houses to be moved rather simply from one location to another. But honestly, I think this lack of a substantial foundation would creep me out. How can cinderblocks at key points be considered a foundation? I don't get it.

I keep hoping that one of the HGTV home renovation shows Peter and I have taken to watching would explain these cinder block foundations, especially since they run into this kind of construction more often. But they haven't, at least so far. Perhaps that's because it's just something they're used to dealing with. Several of these shows are based in the South – Arkansas and Mississippi are the locations of two shows we watch. Our favorite show by far – the one I put on at the end of a particularly stressful day to help me calm down – is *Home Town* starring Erin and Ben Napier. Of all the reality TV

shows one can watch – and trust me I realize full well that these home renovation shows are reality TV catering to the aspirations of the ever shrinking middle class – this show feels genuine. Erin and Ben feel genuine. I'm sure the show is carefully scripted and produced, with prospective clients carefully screened and then coached as to how to appear during filming. But still. Erin and Ben have a genuine concern for the people whom they accept as clients, taking great care to appreciate and acknowledge that a person, sometimes with a family or sometimes alone, will be living in this house at the end of the day. They also have a real concern for the history of the homes they renovate and take great care to use the best materials in the renovation. When rot is found, it is removed and carefully fixed. When foundation issues threaten the entire project, as has happened several times in the shows I have seen, they bring in experts to figure out the problem and then fix it properly.

This is not easily done, especially because many of the houses they work on do not have basements per say. They have crawl spaces. I have watched more than a few shows as they find rot, and then have to go into the crawl space under the house to see the extent of the damage to know what they need to do to fix it. Under the house, crawling on dirt, pushing spider webs away and hopefully not encountering snakes. Yikes!!!! But if this is what it takes to put the house on a solid footing once again, this is what they do. Every time I watch these shows and someone has to crawl under a house, or into a crawl space up in the rafters, I am amazed that there are folks who will actually do this. I watch them from the safety of my living room and I can almost feel the dirt rubbing against my skin, the bugs scurrying away as the flashlight hits them, hopefully not deciding to reverse course toward the flashlight. What's even more surprising is that the people doing this seem to like it! They like crawling around in

the dirt under a house to figure out if it's going to collapse? Hello! That seems dangerous. Obviously it's not or the TV network wouldn't let people do it. But still...

On *Home Town*, Ben and Erin Napier tackle every problem with enthusiasm and a positive energy that is at times surprising. One of their shows in Season 3 (?) showed them renovating a truly decrepit old building into a café for two brothers returning to their hometown of Laurel after going elsewhere and learning the restaurant trade. One of them was a chef and the other was a front of house expert. After looking at a couple of old buildings that I'm sure anyone else would have seen as worthy only of the wrecking ball, the brothers purchased one – I think they paid \$15,000 for it – and work began. I would have been afraid to go into the building never mind work inside it, pulling down old walls, fixing foundations, repairing plumbing and wiring but Ben & Erin never batted an eye. In the end, the brothers had a phenomenal and unique building, complete with an owner's apartment, and a new business was born in a town that just a few years previously had been dying. And that is Erin and Ben's goal – to breath new life into a dying town. And guess what? It's working! Thanks to their efforts over the past several years, new businesses are coming to town, new people are moving to town, and former residents who moved away are coming back. The town is now thriving, all thanks to one talented young couple – they're the age of my daughter – who refused to let their home town die. They saw potential where others saw only decay. They created hope where before there had only been despair. They've been so successful in their efforts that HGTV has created a spin-off series where Ben and Erin, along with many of the other HGTV personalities, take on another small town to help revitalize it. That is also a show worth watching – *Home Town Takeover* – as Wetumpka, Alabama is reborn.

So, why am I talking about HGTV and home renovation shows. Simple. The reason Ben and Erin have devoted their professional lives – important to note is that their contract with HGTV makes their family life *as they define it* their #1 priority – is that they are doing all of this because of their own personal foundations and that, dear ones, is their faith. Ben is the son of a United Methodist pastor and his first job was as a youth pastor. They are still active in their local church, despite their stardom. And, they do not preach their faith during their show at all. Ben occasionally mentions his life as a preacher's kid, but they never make a big deal out of their own personal faith stories. They don't preach. They don't play gospel music as the background in some of their scenes. They don't make a display of their faith. No, they live it. Every day. They do the right thing as they renovate these houses, because it is the right thing to do. They work with folks who can't afford their services as often as they do folks with a fat bank account. They also work with LGBTQ clients, with single mothers, with retired older women buying their first home in their late 70's. In short, I can't think of a better example of what it means to live a faith driven life based on a strong foundation than Ben and Erin Napier.

Of course, they are television personalities. Perhaps all this is just an image they portray on TV because there is something in it for them if they do so. Perhaps I am seeing something in them that's only skin deep. But I really don't think so. I don't think so because you can't fake the level of concern for people that they reveal in every show. You can't fake having a life grounded in and driven by living the faith you've experienced. That's what I see them doing. And in them I find inspiration and encouragement for all of us to claim that strong foundation of faith that Jesus teaches in the Gospels and allow it to transform our lives. Ben and Erin Napier in their work they share with us on their television shows make tangible and real the hope of

new life always possible, of resurrection – for buildings and for people. They are an embodiment of the simple truth that with God, all things are possible. We just have to believe it is and be willing to do the work it requires to accomplish whatever it is that feels impossible in the moment. May God fill us with the faith, the hope and the love required for whatever is calling us to a new beginning. Amen.