

“How Firm a Foundation”

Luke 6.43–49

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 26 August 2007

It is great to be in this new space, isn’t it?! I want to say a word of thanks to each of you who has helped make this possible. To all of you who worked on the capital campaign, and to all who have made gifts to it; to all of you who have worked on the Long-Range Planning and Strategic Planning Committees, and to our Building Committee, who is still hard at work. And thanks to our Men’s Fellowship (as well as Sharon, Julie, and Janet McCulloch), who answered a quick cry for help in unloading and unpacking 96 choir and sanctuary chairs last Wednesday. There are so many people to thank, and I also thank God for the gifts that make this day possible.

Last week, I saw George Theodore poring over a graph with a couple of arced lines on it, and he told me it was a soil impaction report. (Aren’t you glad there are engineers in the world who understand these things?) George Bernard Shaw said “The sign of a truly educated man is to be deeply moved by statistics.” And I’m sure that the data from a soil impaction report qualifies as statistics and that George was deeply moved.

One of the problems we have here on our lot is the presence of “an absorbent aluminium phyllosilicate generally impure clay” called Bentonite...no offense, Sharon! If you wondered why the construction crew had to dig down a story beneath the new administrative wing and also the west wing, it was so they could compact the soil as they added it back into the hole in layers. Each layer had to be removed, replaced, compacted, and tested. So, you’ll be glad to know that we have built our new wings on a firm foundation...not unadulterated Bentonite.

I know that we as a congregation have put our faith into Heath Construction to renovate our building well, but what is the foundation of our faith? There are, of course, dozens of hymns that use this metaphor:

“How firm a foundation for you has been laid”

“All my hope on God is founded...”

“If you but trust in God to guide you...built on the rock that would not move.”

“Teach us to build upon the solid rock.”

“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ love and righteousness...On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand” ... in other words, Bentonite.

“Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone.”



There are many aspects of this construction and renovation effort that are basically invisible to the casual observer. (The chaos is obvious, but there is a lot going on under the surface.) Some of you never saw the 10-foot concrete pillars and layers of compacted soil under the administrative wing. Few of us have seen the new sewer line that goes all the way to Lake Street...but many of us are glad it’s there. Only a handful of us know that we now have three-phase power in this building. You may not notice that there are four inches of rigid foam insulation above your heads right now, which is four more inches than were there before. Did you know that every single-pane glass window in the building is being replaced by low-e, double-pane glazing? Or that we have the second largest installation of energy-saving Solatube skylights in Fort Collins?

While you see some really neat, visible changes in the sanctuary this morning, this is only a tiny part of what has gone on at Plymouth. The vast majority is infrastructure – setting the foundation for the next 50 years of mission and ministry at Plymouth. As we

are grateful to the folks who built this church in the late 1950s, there will be generations who are thankful that we have invested in Plymouth's infrastructure.

You don't build infrastructure in response to an emergency; you plan and commit and do it. It isn't glitzy or attractive, but it makes a difference. The civil engineering studies and parking lot detention ponds and grass pavers may not seem terribly important today, but when the next torrential rains hit Fort Collins, they will prevent flooding.

So, what is our spiritual infrastructure? What do we do now to prepare ourselves for times of difficulty and trial. As Harold Kushner wrote, "Bad things happen to good people." One thing I've observed is that it can be difficult for some of mainline Protestants to lean into their faith in moments of real need. In part, that is because we don't have a black-and-white view of things. We're less likely to attribute a death to "God's will," or to say that it's okay that someone died, because they are in heaven. But, there are things we can do to build a spiritual infrastructure.

One way is to form a good social network: to have friends willing to love you no matter what. Yet, if you remember Job's three pals, Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz, they weren't exactly supportive and useful to Job. Friends are important though.

And it's important to take good care of the bodies we've been given, but as the psalmist reminds us, "The days of our life are seventy years or perhaps eighty if we are strong; even then their span is toil and trouble; they are soon gone and we fly away."¹

You all know where I'm going with this...our spiritual infrastructure is only solid when we build a relationship with God. And the tools and materials we use for a strong foundation are the spiritual disciplines that have been practiced by Christians over the millennia: prayer, worship, silence, study, generosity, and action. "The one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation."²

Action is expressed in a variety of ways by different people. For some, it comes through social action, standing up for the justice that God demands. For others, it comes through service: making coffee on Sunday morning, singing in the choir, preparing a meal for someone, visiting a homebound elder, or serving on the church council. It is important that the action comes as a response to hearing the words of Jesus, whose greatest commandment is to love God fully and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And it isn't just ourselves, but also our kids, who need to develop the foundations of faithful living. And I am really pleased as both a parent and a pastor that we have such great opportunities for learning and faithful action here at Plymouth. One of the familiar, and unfortunate, patterns in mainline Protestant churches is that confirmation, rather than being a path toward increased involvement in the church, is a ticket many confirmands give their parents to skip participation on Sunday morning. The cruel irony is that nobody needs safe, foundation-building community like teenagers do.

When we lay strong foundations, we provide the spiritual infrastructure not only for ourselves, but for those whose lives we touch. In two weeks, on Jubilee Sunday, you will learn more about how your ministry can develop at Plymouth, and I know that you will enjoy what we have in store!

You may know that these past months have not be easy ones for me, and I am finding strength and hope in the deep wells of Celtic Christianity. I won't see some of you before I leave on a pilgrimage to Ireland in two weeks, so I leave you with a prayer from

¹ Ps. 90.10

² Lk. 6.49

Iona, written by Philip Newell, which seems appropriate amidst the chaos of construction, architectural creativity coming to life, and new beginnings in this place:

“O God of life, who chooses creation over chaos and new beginnings over emptiness, we bring to you the disorder of our nations and world and the emptiness of our lives and relationships. Bless us and the nations with the grace of creativity. Bless us and all people with the hope of new beginnings. Amen.”³

³ J. Philip Newell, *Celtic Treasury*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005)