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Today's gospel lesson is the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. We are invited to a vision of life in which we live with the heart that Jesus gives us, a heart that enables us to overcome struggles with anger and contempt, lust and inappropriate relationships, uncontrolled speech, grudges and getting even, a heart that seeks to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. Jesus describes a way of growing spiritually in which we give, and pray and fast for God alone and not for human approval or praise. He prohibits us from storing up treasure on earth, worrying about material things, and judging others. He commands us to persevere in asking, seeking, knocking prayer, to do to others what we'd like them to do to us, and to enter the narrow gate of obedience to his words that leads to life. Wouldn't we all want to be able to live the kind of life Jesus describes? Quite often when something is not going right in our life, when we are not being our best self, it is highly likely we are not doing something Jesus says we are to do in The Sermon on the Mount.

The whole end of the sermon is look out – beware of false prophets, be careful to know Jesus and do what he says, and a final warning about impending storms and the disastrous end we may meet if we don't build our life on the rock of Jesus and his teaching.

*"Beware of **false prophets**, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are **ravenous wolves**. **You will know them by their fruits.***

Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?

In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

*Thus **you will know them by their fruits.***

Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and did we not cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you, go away from me, you evil doers.'"

*Everyone then who **hears** these words of mine and **acts** on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.*

*And everyone who hears these words of mine and **does not act** on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!”*

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

One of the things so many of us love about Cape Cod is the beautiful coastline. A number of BBC folks have houses with lovely ocean views. What a treat it is to see the sun rise or set over the ocean (depending where you are on the Cape you may see either), while standing on your porch, to watch the waves after a storm or to step right from your deck down to the beach. Within hours, however, a beach front home can disappear into the ocean or suffer severe damage as the destructive winds and high tides of nor'easters or hurricanes batter the coastline, as they did during our surprise storm in December. Sometimes, not only a house but the sandy shore on which it sat can be completely washed away as a result of these storms.

I have to confess that living on a large sandbar; these words of Jesus make me nervous. All of Cape Cod seems to be built on sand! Jesus' words have their basis in good building practices, it is wiser to build on rock that won't be washed away in a flash flood than it is to build a house on something as shifty and unstable as sand. Jesus uses the image of building on rock as a picture of what someone is like who not only *hears* his words, but who *acts* on them. To hear the Sermon on the Mount and not to act on what one heard is to be as foolish as one who builds on sand.

Jesus warns us the first step in having a secure foundation is not building on the teaching of false prophets. Jesus instructs us twice, “You will know them (false prophets) by their fruits.” How we can tell who is a false prophet and who is a faithful one is not always easy. One writer noted, “For a message that seems so simple, *“You will know them by their fruits,”* these verses bear the potential for great problems in the church. It would be all too easy to read and then proceed to carry out what one scholar call *“a fruit inspection.”* In other words to go about examining other Christians, other churches, on the basis of this text: judging and even possibly condemning them. This cannot be your intention, Lord. In view of your strict teaching against judgment, there is no way to use these verses as a hunting permit against other believers.

“In fact, properly understood, this saying might support a deeper tolerance for others. So long as we have focused on beliefs, we Christians have historically had trouble recognizing and respecting one another. If we could focus on the fruits, evaluate

the faith of fellow Christians, not on the basis of their doctrine or sacraments alone, but rather on the evidence we see of Christian love, the hungry children fed, the homeless housed, the captives of all kinds set free, then our ecumenical relations might find new impetus.”¹

False teachers are known by the fruit of their lives and how their teaching and lives are true to and pursuing what Jesus teaches. Jesus knew that some of those who heard his words would never be the same. Their priorities, values, actions, speech, patterns of thought would be different. He also knows there are others who come to hear him speak on the mountain, enjoyed the experience, yet they will not do what Jesus has said to do. James 1:22 says, *“We are to be doers of the word and not hearer’s only deceiving ourselves.”*

Until Jesus comes again there will always be false prophets who lead people astray from the true work of the Lord and life as his follower. I know the end times and second coming are of particular interest to some of you and I want to encourage you to mark your calendars for May 12-14 when Dr. Jack Davis, a professor of theology at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary will lead a retreat here at BBC on the End Times, Revelation, and the second coming. Here in Matthew 7 and again in Matthew 24, Jesus speaks about **false prophets**, when he will return and judgment. In Matthew 24:11 and 24 Jesus says as time goes by, *“many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”* In Matthew 24 Jesus makes a couple things perfectly clear about his return and judgment: v. 36, *“About that day and hour **no one knows**, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* God only knows when it will happen so we shouldn’t squander our time trying to figure out when it will be. Secondly, Jesus says what we are to do is to **keep awake** (24:42) and to **be ready** (24:44), and that is done by **being about the master’s work until he returns** (24:46). Our master’s work is laid out in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus’ stark, jarring statement in Matthew 7:21-23 is that on Judgment Day there will be surprises and some people who thought they had secured guaranteed reservations will be shocked and upset to find there is no place for them. I really don’t want to be like the one who after decades of ministry and service for the Lord is told at the end, *“I never knew you.”*

¹ J. Barrie Shepherd, Prayers from the Mount

In his paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Matthew 7:21-23 this way: *“Knowing the correct password – saying ‘Master, Master,’ for instance – isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. **What is required is serious obedience – doing what my Father wills.** I can see it now – at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, ‘Master, we preached the Message, we bashed demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.’ And do you know what I am going to say? ‘You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here.’”*²

No matter how exuberantly we may say, “Jesus is Lord,” if our words are not accompanied by a commitment to being obedient, the Lord suggests our foundation may not hold when life’s inevitable storms strike (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus spoke of digging deep to lay a solid foundation rather than building on the surface, even though that might seem easier and more inviting. We live in a culture that is crumbling in many ways because it champions values that will not prove solid in stormy weather. I am amazed that the leading items in the local news in the last day or so have been the Powerball Lottery total and a bizarre, voyeuristic obsession with one particular murder case. The apparent growth or obsession with the sensational, convenience, selfishness, greed, corruption, mindless entertainment, a lack of commitment to truth, integrity, and honesty - we are building on a sandy and slippery slope that will not stand for long.

It is in the storms that the difference between interested listeners, false prophets and obedient disciples is evident. It is in the storms of illness and grief, of relational trouble or family heartache, of addiction or financial hardship, of confusion and uncertainty – it is in the storms when our foundation is revealed. When the worst storms come, I pray that we will be found to have built upon the rock of hearing and acting on Jesus’ words so that people will say, “That is a life founded upon the Rock.”

I get concerned that some people seem to think that if you faithfully follow Jesus your life will be filled with receiving one blessing after another. Jesus says that storms will come in life no matter who we are or what we believe. Rain will fall, the flood will come and the wind will blow. Whether we can face life’s inevitable storms with hope or fear depends on our foundation.

On Monday night I had the pleasure of getting together in Boston with three of my closest friends from elementary school. One of my friends reminded me of his favorite story he ever heard me tell in a sermon. He thought of it because someone had

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, page 22.

just sent him email of that story and of course said it recently happened. The story is one my mother's father shared in a sermon back in the 1940's!

There was a brick layer who filled out an insurance form. This bricklayer had to move 500 pounds of bricks from the top of a four story building to the street below. The problem was he tried to do it all by himself. "It would have taken me too long to move all the bricks by hand, so I decided to use a pulley on the top of the building. I secured it and ran a rope through and went down to the street and secured the rope. Then I went back on the roof and put the 500 pounds of bricks in the barrel. I went back down to the street and untied the rope to guide the bricks down. Unfortunately since I only weigh 145 pounds, I was jerked off the ground so fast that I didn't have time to even think of letting go of the rope. As I passed between the second and third floors I met the barrel coming down that accounts for the bruises and lacerations on my upper body. I held on tightly to the rope until I reached the top and my hand became jammed in the pulley which accounts for my broken thumb. At the same time however the barrel hit the sidewalk with a bang and the bottom fell out. With the weight of the bricks gone the barrel only weighed around 40 pounds so my 145 pound body began a swift descent and I met the barrel coming up, this accounts for my broken ankle. Slowed only slightly, I continued my descent and landed on the pile of bricks, this accounts for my sprained back and broken collarbone. At this point I lost my presence of mind completely and I let go of the rope which brought the barrel crashing down on me and this accounts for my head injuries. As for the last question on the form, 'What would you do if the same situation arose again?' please be advised that I am finished trying to do this job all by myself."

Building our life on our own foundation is a recipe for disaster. Sometimes we have to go through a few storms before we learn that we can't handle life on our own sandy foundation. Jesus invites us to hear his words and build our lives on them. Jesus taught that the way to live successfully is by committing ourselves to him, resulting in a lifestyle that reflects we are striving to do what he teaches through the grace that he gives. Is your life built on an unshakeable foundation of hope, are you anchored to the rock?

Living isn't easy and there will be storms and floods that threaten to destroy us if we don't have a firm foundation. But if we come to Jesus, hear his words, and act on them, then when the storms come our foundation will not be shaken. Cuban-American pastor Eloy Cruz summed up the Lord's teaching this way:

*“You only need two loves in your life:
for God, and for the person in front of you at any particular time.”*

Blessing: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13